

Prince John's Insurance-Fraud Case!

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BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

THE FRISCO DETECTIVE'S THUG-TANGLE;

Or, THE JUNK-DEALER'S DEATH-DEAL.



"THIS IS MY WAY OF PLAYING EVEN WITH THE GANG WHEN THEY GIT TOO MIGHTY SMART, SEE?"

The Frisco Detective's Thug-Tangle;

OR,

The Junk-Dealer's Death-Deal.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "THE MAN FROM TEXAS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A NOB HILL TRAGEDY.

"You have no further recommendations to make, then, Mr. Kavanaugh?"

"Not on my own account, Prince. Business was never better within my knowledge. Money is plenty, and collections easily made. As for the amount of business—well, let the records show for themselves."

The insurance agent smiled broadly as he spoke, nodding his curly head toward the document-laden table at which the two men were then seated.

John Prince, Detective and Special Agent in employ of the great Insurance Trust, partly imitated that gesture by way of approval, at the same time fingering sundry of the papers which Horace Kavanaugh had submitted to his notice.

Leaning far enough forward to touch a paper with caressing finger-tip, the local agent spoke again:

"Take that, for instance, Prince. It cost me, all told, less than one hour's work to write that risk, and I look at it as a little gold mine!"

"For yourself, the insured, or the company?"

"For each and all of us, though the harvest comes at different times, of course," answered Kavanaugh, with a good-natured smile at that veiled thrust. "You know our resident physician, of course?"

"Wesley Morgantrude, M. D., you mean?"

"Yes. It is admitted that he ranks second to none as an examining physician, and he reported this risk as strictly first class. Mr. Hillyard paid the first premium in cash, even before he saw his policy, and now—well, the second semi-annual premium is due next week, and if it was already in bank, to my credit, I couldn't feel surer of it than I feel right now!"

"A large amount, too!" thoughtfully said John Prince. "He is one of the Frisco nabobs, then?"

"Well, hardly that, although he lives on Nob Hill, in a mansion which is—excuse me, please!"

Horace Kavanaugh broke off abruptly as the sharp tinkling of a bell came from one corner of his well-appointed office, and as he left his seat to answer the call, John Prince followed these movements with a lazy curiosity in his keen eyes.

Answering the call, Kavanaugh listened for a few moments, then uttered a sharp exclamation which fell little short of being an oath.

"What? Again—say it over, and—Hilary Hillyard?"

Silence save for those painfully strained ears, then the insurance agent dropped the instrument, staggering like one drunken as he turned away, his eyes wildly dilated and his face almost ghastly pale as it met the gaze of his business visitor.

"What's gone wrong, Kavanaugh?" asked Prince, curiously.

"A lie! It can't be true!" hoarsely gasped the agent.

"What's a lie, man? You look as though you'd been listening to your death-warrant! Can I help you at all, Kavanaugh?"

Those trembling hands were fumbling among the documents with which the table-top was strewn, and closing upon a certain one, the insurance agent seemed trying to read it, yet with agitation so strong as to defeat his own will for the moment.

Upon that document, showed in bold, black characters the name of the "risk" concerning whom the two men had been talking but so brief a time before, and John Prince quickly spoke:

"It's Hilary Hillyard, then? Not—surely not dead, Kavanaugh?"

"He says so—Van Scotten—but it's a lie! It can't help but be a lie, don't you know it, man alive?"

"Hendrick Van Scotten, do you mean?"

"Yes, I cut in just ahead of him with Hillyard for this last hundred thousand policy, and now—It's all an infernal trick, to scare me out of my boots for—Say it's a trick, man alive!"

The Insurance Detective looked grave and stern enough now, and one strong hand closed upon an arm as he spoke distinctly:

"What was it Van Scotten said? Give his words, as nearly as you can remember them, Kavanaugh. Quick!"

"He said that Hillyard was gone—killed last night, or this morning—"

"Where, and how? Did he mention place or method?"

"I can't remember, for—Confound it, man!" with a touch of sudden indignation as he wrested his arm free. "You look as though you took it all for gospel truth, instead of being merely a clumsy hoax, for which I'll play even with Van, if it takes me—eh?"

"Come if you like. I'm going to investigate a bit," crisply cut in the Insurance Detective, taking his hat and hurriedly leaving the office.

It was still an early hour of the day, although the two men had for some little time been closeted together, for John Prince had made his arrangements for taking the east-bound train that morning, and this was to be his finishing touch of business in San Francisco.

But now—

Well, Hilary Hillyard carried insurance on his life to the amount—in round figures—of half a million dollars, and only a few minutes before a keen, shrewd, thoroughly competent solicitor had pronounced him the safest of risks, from an assurance standpoint.

And now—

If that message through the telephone-wire was correct, and Hilary Hillyard had been killed, how had it come to pass?

Was it an accident, such as any reputable citizen is liable to meet with in his every-day life? or was it the outcome of a heinous crime?

Swiftly as John Prince moved, the insurance agent kept pace with him, and when the detective hailed a slowly-moving hack, Kavanaugh was at his elbow, excitedly muttering:

"Me too! I'm going along, and when we've proved it all a lie, I want your company while I go thump the pudding out of Hendrick Van Scotten!"

Prince made no answer to this speech, but entering the hack, bade the man head for Nob Hill, and to not let his horses fall asleep by the way.

In swift motion now, the detective spoke to his companion, and by a few sentences contrived to restore a goodly portion of the insurance agent's wonted coolness.

"Be it lie or truth, Kavanaugh, you want all your wits about you if you're to amount to a hill of beans. Now—you know best where our man lives, so give cabby his directions, will you?"

This was quickly done, and the interval of waiting was broken only once or twice by short remarks, for neither man was feeling in the mood for idle chatter while those ugly doubts still hung in the balance.

Horace Kavanaugh gave a low growl as he craned head and neck out at the lowered window on his side as the hack came within eye-shot of that noted residence portion of the Pacific Queen, for surely that unusual gathering near yonder almost palatial mansion meant something gone wrong?

John Prince was first to jump out of the hack, while it was still in motion, and tossing the driver a coin which richly repaid his services, the detective hurried toward the house, closely followed by Kavanaugh.

A stalwart shape in uniform barred their passage, and an officer of the Metropolitan force spoke firmly, if respectfully:

"Sorry, gentlemen, but it's no admission. Fall back, please!"

"There has something happened, then, officer? Accident or murder?" asked Prince, gravely.

"That's outside of my instructions, sir. Will you fall back, or must I furnish an escort?"

"But Hillyard: he isn't dead?" persisted the insurance agent, hardly capable just then

of taking a hint; but Prince was more nearly master of himself, and before that uniformed guardian could do more than make an impatient gesture, he was forcing Kavanaugh away, paying precious little heed to that worthy's resistance.

"Don't be a bigger fool than nature intended, man," muttered the Special, while thus engaged. "Will you learn any faster for getting the collar? Simmer down, and play you didn't curse the chief, for ducats!"

A tall, gaunt figure was rapidly approaching the spot, and the keen-eyed detective found no difficulty in recognizing the then head of the Police Department, Virgo Paulette, the best hated, the most feared man in all San Francisco that day.

With a swift movement John Prince freed himself from one whom he now deemed an incumbrance, and hastening to meet the chief of police, spoke rapidly:

"Pass me through the lines if you're going inside, chief. Hillyard was one of our heaviest risks, and—"

"That's Kavanaugh, yonder?"

"Yes, but he don't count. Bar him out, at least until he can recover a portion of his usual wits. Eyes open! He's coming, with a bulge!"

Chief Paulette made a slight gesture, and the excited insurance agent found his way barred again by an officer, and before he could finish his plea for admission, chief and detective had passed along to the front entrance, through which they vanished from his sight.

It was easy enough to see that the entire premises were in possession of the police, for there was a certain order amidst all that disorder which could never have come about through the servants, an occasional glimpse of whom could be obtained by those observant eyes as the Insurance Detective strode along in company with the high official.

In obedience to a silent signal from the chief, one of the policemen led the way up a broad flight of stairs, the rank smell of smoke growing stronger as they drew nearer the sleeping chamber.

With quivering nostrils almost as busy as his keen eyes, John Prince passed on, already trying to unriddle what was destined to prove one of his most complicated cases.

"There's been a fire," his reasoning ran in those seconds. "Accidental, or incendiary? A blind for a suicide, or a mask for murder?"

"It's in here, chief," said the officer, in low tones, pausing before a closed door, guarded by another patrolman. "We've left all as we found it, of course, for it's a job for the coroner—sure!"

"He has been notified, then?"

"Yes, sir. While waiting for your arrival—"

"I was away on business, and so failed to get word as quickly as I should, otherwise," gravely explained the chief, then motioning the officer aside, and opening the door himself. "Come, Prince John; I may need your eyes, here."

The two men crossed that threshold, then stopped short, almost involuntarily.

Neither sight nor scent was the most agreeable, and, strong though their nerves were, either man would have found it easier to retreat than to advance further, just then.

The chamber had been handsomely, even luxuriously furnished, but now all was marred by fire and smoke, the rank scent of which was still oppressive to human lungs, although two of the windows had been raised as a means of ventilation.

With that acrid scent was blended another, even more repulsive, and Virgo Paulette gave a low, harsh exclamation as he strode across the chamber to turn back the inside blinds, thus letting a flood of sunlight into that chamber of death.

For such it surely was, as the keenly observant eyes of the Insurance Detective had already told him.

There, amidst the charred and blackened ruins of what had once been a costly bed, lay the grimly hideous remains of a human being!

"Ugly work, Prince!" muttered the chief, one sinewy hand gripping an arm of his present companion, as though to hinder his disturbing aught before eyes had completed their inventory.

"Odd work, anyway, chief. Rather curi-

ous how much worse the bed has suffered than the rest of the outfit, isn't it?"

Before more could be said, there came the sound of hasty footsteps without, and the chamber door opened to admit the coroner, Amidon Porson.

A brief greeting, a few words by way of explanation, then the two officials fell busily to work, trying to read that death-riddle by the light offered them.

Prince John held himself in the background for the present, but his wits were none the less busy for that, nor his notes the less distinct because they were written upon his mind alone.

The body lay in the midst of the ruins of the bed, just as the fire had left it.

The bedding was almost entirely destroyed, the springs had fallen, one side and the foot-board had dropped out, while the tall, richly carved head-board was supported by the wall alone.

That ghastly shape clearly represented a man of rather more than average dimensions, and though the flames had wrought most cruel work thereon, Prince John caught no echo of doubt as the coroner spoke:

"Poor Hillyard! It's *him*, safe enough! And to think that only yesterday I met him on the street, hale and hearty as a four-year-old buck!"

"You recognize him, then, Porson?" asked Paulette.

"Sure! I'd know that shape—I'd recognize those shoulders if I saw them among ten thousand others! And—wait a bit, please!"

A movement on his part let a ray of sunshine fall across that gruesome object, and glimpsing something which might set all further doubts at rest, the coroner gingerly touched a fire-marred hand, moving it barely enough to expose a heavy seal ring to more perfect view.

"Right hand—little finger—seal ring! I could swear to all that, with my eyes shut, chief," fairly spluttered the coroner, letting his natural excitement get the upper-hand for the moment. "I've seen that ring more times than I've got hairs—almost!"

The ghost of a smile flitted across that stern visage as Chief Paulette glanced toward that bald pate, but he made no remark; for, just then Prince John, the Insurance Detective, stepped forward, to utter:

"Whoever it may prove to be, one thing is plain enough: the flames never did *this* sort of work! It's neither accident nor suicide, but a case of foul murder!"

CHAPTER II.

A CASE FOR THE CORONER.

As he pronounced those words, Prince John bent forward with guiding finger, pointing out a startling fact which had until then escaped all eyes save his own keen orbs.

In that fire-marred skull was a deep wide wound, such as only an ax or a hatchet could have produced!

"No man could have dealt himself such a blow as that, gentleman," added the detective, gravely, as the other bent closer to the remains. "That sets at rest all question of self-slaughter, or of accident."

"It opens up another vista, though," said Paulette, drawing back and pressing handkerchief to his nose and lips for a brief space. "It looks like a case of—What now, Porson?"

This sharp question was drawn forth by a low but eager ejaculation from the coroner's lips, but Porson acted in place of replying, lifting a leg of the dead man, together with a portion of the mattress which that body had saved from entire destruction.

"Look, gentlemen!" the portly official spluttered, free hand pointing to an uncovered object as he spoke. "Mark it well, for—*blood*, as sure as fate!"

Chief Paulette bent forward and picked up the heavy hatchet which the coroner had so revealed, and then all three gazed in silence upon the weapon which, almost beyond the possibility of a doubt, had taken the life of the victim on the couch.

Protected from the flames by the mattress and the body, both blade and handle were intact, save for an inch or two of the latter; there the wood was charred and blackened, but enough was left unharmed to furnish a

significant link in the chain of crime which was being slowly shaped in that chamber of death.

Both blade and handle showed stains which could only mean blood, and taking this in connection with that ugly gash through scalp and skull, the inference was clear: the hatchet had caused the death of Hilary Hillyard!

"You are witnesses to the finding, gentlemen," gravely said the coroner, breaking the brief silence which had fallen over the trio. "It may prove to be evidence of the utmost importance, in case—"

"Just so," coolly cut in Chief Paulette, taking possession of the weapon as he spoke. "We'll testify, when summoned, of course; and until that time comes I'll take good care of this article."

The coroner frowned a bit, but raised no objection, and after giving the body a more careful examination, the interested trio moved slowly about the room, searching in every nook and corner for further evidence which might serve to cast more light upon this case.

Apparently there was no such evidence to be found, since none was brought to light by either of the party.

For one thing, the fire had destroyed much, and almost as a matter of course had wiped out any mute testimony as to the author of that tragedy.

Equally of course there was nothing to be learned from an examination of door or windows, since the alarm of fire had drawn rough and hasty workers to the death chamber, who could hardly be expected to have left aught exactly as they found it.

Under these conditions, one so thoroughly versed in criminal matters as was Virgo Paulette, would hardly waste precious time for naught, and presently he ceased that inspection, speaking to Coroner Porson:

"Whatever the verdict, it's plainly a case for your handling, Amidon. Have you taken any steps to summon a jury, as yet?"

"Not yet. I hurried here as soon as notified, but—"

"Then I reckon you'd as well get a hustle on, Porson," cut in the chief, turning toward the door. "See to your jury, and I'll put a good man on guard over this door. Of course all shall remain as it is now, until after you have viewed the corpse."

Porson muttered his thanks, and shuffled through the opening as Chief Paulette pushed the door wide, hurrying off in pursuit of his duty.

In silence Prince John followed the chief from the death-chamber, standing by while Paulette instructed the policeman in his present duty, listening keenly to both questions and answers as they came.

There really was not much to be gleaned from this patrolman, beyond the simple fact that he had been among the earliest on the scene after the alarm of fire was spread, and among the first to take note of that flame-bitten body amidst the ruins.

"Who gave the alarm of fire, in the first place?"

"That I can't tell you, sir. I was at the other end of my beat, and all was confusion when I got here."

"Could no one tell you much?"

"Couldn't, or wouldn't, sir. I asked the lot, but nobody knew who had been first to cry out fire, or whether the alarm came from inside or from without."

Satisfied that further information was not likely to be secured from that quarter, the chief turned elsewhere, Prince John playing his shadow most faithfully, not once opening his lips for remark or for question until it was made perfectly clear that none of the policemen in attendance could throw any light upon the tragic affair.

The alarm of fire had drawn thither the two officers on whose beat the Hillyard residence stood, and the other men had been sent to the scene of trouble by the captain in charge of the Central Station, in the absence of his superior officer.

Learning from the sergeant in charge of the squad that none of the servants had been permitted to quit the premises since his arrival, Paulette quietly made a tour of the mansion, seemingly paying no attention to the house people, but in reality studying each one of them closely.

As a result of this brief inspection, he re-

tired to the spacious dining-room, and from there sent word for the butler to attend.

This summons was promptly obeyed, and answering that profound bow with a courteous wave of a hand, Chief Paulette spoke:

"Your name is—what?"

"Morris, sir, John Morris, if it please your Honor," answered the servant, bowing as before, then furtively brushing hand over eyes as he regained an erect attitude.

He was short and portly, bald save for a fringe of silvery white hair around the base of his skull, and smooth-shaven save for twin tabs of snowy whiskers, cut off on a level with the lobes of his ears.

His broad face was plainly that of an honest man, although now it showed mottled and swollen, in keeping with his grief-red-denied eyeballs.

"You belong to the house, of course, Morris?"

"Yes, sir. For twenty-odd years back, sir. And for twelve of them as butler, your Honor."

"Hilary Hillyard was your employer, of course?"

The butler bowed assent, seemingly unwilling to trust his tongue just then. There were tears dimming his eyes, and yet—

"It's not for pure love of that master, or I'll never make another guess!" decided the Insurance Detective, noiselessly shifting his station for one from whence he could have a clearer view of that agitated countenance. "It's more like—*fear*!"

If a fancy like this struck Chief Paulette, he gave no sign. Simply waiting a few moments as if to let the butler rally, he spoke again:

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Morris, so soon after your receiving such a terrible shock, but try and believe it's all for the interest of that now dead master."

"Oh, sir! if you could only fetch him back to life again!" exclaimed the butler, his eyes swimming in tears, his clasped hands trembling violently, his lips quiver and his color changing with every breath. "I'd give ten years of my life! I'd give—anything—everything, rather than have such a horrible ending to—to such a—"

He broke off, hiding face in hands, shivering like one in a hard ague-chill.

Prince John gave a low sound which drew the eyes of Virgo Paulette his way, and then, unseen and unsuspected by the grief-stricken butler, the Insurance Detective gripped hand with hand, that motion plainly bidding the head of police to—

"Squeeze him; squeeze him dry!"

With a brief nod of comprehension, Paulette placed a chair for the servant, and gently forcing him to be seated, spoke in still more friendly tones, much as one might strive to soothe a frightened child.

He assured Morris that their whole desire was to gather all possible items which could at all bear upon the tragedy, and that he considered it a sacred duty owing to that ill-fated master, by the butler, to yield freely all information that lay within his knowledge. And so—

"Who of the family, besides Mr. Hillyard, was under this roof last night, my dear fellow?"

"None, sir! Not one!" asserted Morris, choking down his emotions and clearing his throat, with an evident effort.

"Mrs. Hillyard, then?"

"Gone on a visit to friends living in Sacramento, sir."

"Since when, please?"

"Last week, Saturday, sir."

"And the young gentlemen? They are in town, aren't they?"

"I'm not so—that is, Mr. Oren Poole has gone to Sacramento, sir, unless I've been misinformed as to *him*, sir."

"That is Mrs. Hillyard's son, by a former husband, I believe?"

The butler bowed assent, again strongly agitated.

"And the other: young Westlake? He has not left town, also, has he?"

"No, sir. Not unless—I don't *think* he has gone, your Honor; but he never—I know he couldn't ever—"

Again Prince John gave that pantomimic order, and again Chief Paulette signed his perfect understanding.

"Of course not, my dear fellow," and that,

usually stern voice now sounded almost purring in its mellow music. "Leonard Westlake has a firm if humble friend in you, I see, but—does he really need defending, just now, John Morris?"

The alteration was complete as it was sudden, and the butler shrunk visibly from that cold, cutting tone as from a gleaming weapon aimed against his own life.

But, he rallied as swiftly, and forcing his voice under control, answered:

"Not from *me*, sir, he don't! I never hinted as much, nor I never won't—so there, now!"

"Westlake was not on the best of terms with Hillyard, was he?"

"I don't know—"

"Steady, John Morris!" and a warning finger tapped his arm. "Lying can only hurt the man you're trying to shield, so answer, please!"

"If so, 'twasn't Master Leonard's fault, anyway," almost sulkily retorted the butler. "At times an angel fresh from Heaven couldn't live in peace with—God forgive me for speaking so, and he, *dead*!"

Again those unsteady hands rose to meet and hide the face which bowed over, and again the other men interchanged meaning looks.

Past all doubt John Morris was striving to hide something from the light, and what could that be save knowledge which might—which almost surely *would* endanger the liberty if not the life of this, his young master?

So it seems to these men, each of whom was well versed in reading crime riddles, and in bringing light forth from darkness.

Waiting for a minute or two, Chief Paulette resumed:

"You admit, then, that common report is true; that there had been trouble, quarrels, between Mr. Hillyard and the son of his first wife, Leonard Westlake?"

"If so, 'twasn't Master Leonard's fault," reassured Morris, with a touch of doggedness entering his voice as well as showing in his face.

"That all may be, yet the facts remain: they *did* quarrel?" persisted Paulette. "Now, take time for thought, if you really need it, John Morris, but when you *do* answer, let it be straight as a string. *Sabe*?"

"Why would I even think of lying to you, sir?" sulkily.

"You'd be mighty foolish to try it on, John, and so—*when* was Leonard Westlake here at this house last?"

Two pair of very keen eyes were trying to read that face, and they surely saw embarrassment, if nothing more. Yet the butler spoke up promptly enough, after all:

"I couldn't say as to *that*, sir, right off. I don't just remember *how* long ago it was that Master Leonard was here last time."

"Then he wasn't here, say—last night, or this morning, Morrison?"

That red face turned a bit paler, but those watery blue eyes bravely met the gleaming orbs of the chief of police, and Morris averred:

"No, sir, he wasn't here for a week, anyway. And if you— Oh!"

For just then there came the sound of swift steps, and the door was flung open to permit the passage of a tall, shapely figure, which paused, then shrunk back again as he saw who was present before him.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

RECOGNITION was instant, and Chief Paulette spoke first, saying:

"We were just talking of you, Mr. Westlake. A sad home-coming, this. Your step-father—"

"Then it is true, what I heard, sir?"

"If I knew what that was, perhaps I might answer. You heard what?"

"That there had been trouble up here, and he—Hillyard—was hurt, in some way," hastily explained the young man, his tones a bit unsteady, and his hand trembling slightly as he passed a kerchief over his damp temples.

Before Chief Paulette could say more, Prince John touched an arm, inclining head toward the death-chamber while speaking:

"Seeing is better than telling, Mr. Westlake. Come with me, please!"

The butler uttered a half-smothered cry, but Chief Paulette caught the arm which involuntarily moved toward Westlake, and before that interruption could effect its purpose, the Insurance Detective was moving away with the young man.

As they began ascending the stairs, and that repulsive odor grew more pronounced, Westlake seemed to shrink, and spoke unsteadily:

"This trouble—accident—how serious, sir? Not—surely it was not so bad as—where is Mr. Hillyard, then?"

"In here," gravely answered the detective, making a sign which won them admission to the chamber. "See for yourself, Mr. Westlake!"

With a swift yet natural motion the detective caused the young man to cross the threshold and stand fairly face to face with that awful witness, while he himself stood a little to one side, keenly scanning the face and noting every movement made by this suspect.

For a brief space Leonard Westlake seemed unable to comprehend the hideous truth, standing stock-still and staring dazedly about the room, plainly shocked by the ruin wrought therein, but seemingly untouched by the presence of death itself.

Only for a half-score seconds, however. Then, as he caught sight of the fire-marred body, he turned ghastly pale, shrinking back with a low, choking cry of horror and—was it fear?

"You asked for your step-father, sir, and yonder he lies," distinctly pronounced the Insurance Detective, then adding, after a pause: "What is left of him, I should say!"

With an evident effort of will power, Westlake rallied, and though his breath came short and hardly, he moved toward those charred ruins, bending over as though resolved to first make sure his eyesight had not deceived him.

"*Dead!* And *such* a death! And only last night—"

So far the young man muttered, as if unconsciously, but, as he cut himself short, from the threshold came the quick query:

"What about last night, Mr. Westlake?"

Leonard turned swiftly, to see Chief Paulette there, waiting for an answer, his face showing stern and hard, but his eyes full of fire such as only the born man-hunter ever shows.

In that instant he seemed to recognize the truth for the first time, and a hot, if brief-lived, flush lit up his face. A strong hand clinched tightly, and his dark-brown eyes caught a fiery sheen as they flashed from chief to detective, then back again.

It was as though he recognized dangerous enemies, and knowing escape by flight to be out of the question, he was nerving himself for a fight to the finish against heavy odds!

"What about last night, please?" persisted Paulette, as that reply failed to come as desired. "When you left here, last night, nothing of this had happened, of course?"

The young man shook his head in negation, moving toward the door with the unsteady steps of one growing dizzy, or turning deathly sick at stomach.

Chief Paulette stepped aside to grant him exit, and Prince John followed closely. The door was closed behind them, and at a sign from the chief, guard was resumed over the death-chamber.

"Not *here*," muttered Westlake, moving toward the head of the stairs. "I can't talk while—*ugh!* And my last words were curses on his head for a—how could I guess, though?"

Behind his back four keen eyes met, but no words were spoken. If Leonard Westlake saw fit to cut his own throat, ought they to interfere?

The effort of descending that flight of steps seemed to bring back something of his usual strength of mind, as well as of body, and though his face showed ghastly pale as he faced them, young Westlake spoke in fairly steady tones:

"You're wronging me in your thoughts, gentlemen. As Heaven hears my words, I never harmed that poor wretch, even in thought!"

"Yet you quarreled with him last night?" half questioned, half asserted Chief Paulette.

An inarticulate cry came from beyond,

and Chief Paulette turned his head in time to detect the butler making violent gestures toward his young master; but before he could say aught, Westlake spoke out:

"The naked truth's the wisest, if not the best, poor old John. And I'd be lying if I tried to deny *that*: I *was* here, last night, and we *did* have hard words; we *did* part with still harder feelings on both sides."

Morris groaned aloud in mental misery, but cried, huskily:

"You never—tell 'em you never done it, dear master!"

"Who dares even hint that I did?" sternly cried Westlake, twin spots of vivid color leaping into his face, and his dark eyes glowing with the red light of fierce indignation as they swept from face to face before him. "If any one does, I brand it a lie, he a liar! If *you*, Chief Paulette—"

Stepping forward, the head of police placed a hand upon an arm, eyes meeting eyes as he coldly pronounced:

"I offer no hints, I make no assertion, Mr. Westlake. There has been a grave crime committed here, and it is my wish, even as it is my sworn duty under the law, to investigate matters until I find out the whole truth. If *you* can tell me aught that helps clear away this mystery, is it not your duty to meet me at least half-way?"

"Yes, but when it comes to— What is it you expect me to say, sir?"

"Nothing that you need be ashamed of saying, sir, since all I ask for is the naked truth," promptly declared the chief, at the same time gently impelling the young man toward the dining-room, into which John Morris had retreated after that clumsy warning. "Surely you will not refuse to assist us, so far, Westlake?"

"If I could only tell—was there no clue? Was there no one seen or heard or—nothing at all to show who did the ugly job, sir?" asked Westlake, yielding to that subtle guidance, but shivering a bit as the door closed behind them with an audible click.

Paulette paused where the light from one of the windows fell fairly upon that white face, passing by those hurried queries to utter:

"To start with, Mr. Westlake, we're trying to find out when and by whom Hilary Hillyard was last seen alive. In *your* case, that would be just what hour, please?"

Again that swift shrinking and swifter rallying. Only the keenest of eyes, and they on the vigilant out-look, could have detected this; but John Prince as well as Virgo Paulette saw as much, and registered it for possible use in the future.

Either to cover that embarrassment, or else because he really felt the need of support after receiving such a dreadful shock, Leonard Westlake moved aside to sink into a chair, forcing a wan smile as he said:

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but I've got to—*just got to!* This blow has taken all the starch out of me, and my legs— You were saying, sir?"

"That it may save both time and trouble if you will be so kind as to state, distinctly, just what took place during your visit here, last night," gravely suggested Chief Paulette. "You called to see Hilary Hillyard, of course?"

Leonard bowed assent, then covered his eyes for a brief space, like one who seeks to rally his scattered thoughts.

The delay was brief, and when he looked up again, it was to say:

"Yes, gentlemen, I called here last night to see Mr. Hillyard, my step-father. I called on business; disagreeable business for us both, I regret to say!"

"And the precise nature of that business, sir?"

"I'll tell you, sir, because I can see how you *might* fool yourself were I to hold back aught of the truth," impulsively answered the young man, a touch of color coming back to his blanched cheeks. "I was awfully hard pressed for cash, and I came here to get back at least a portion of my own, gentlemen!"

"From Hillyard, you mean?"

"Yes. He owed me money—owes me it still, as he has owed it ever since the death of my poor mother! And when I couldn't get even a miserable moiety of my just dues—well, I hate to think it, *now*, but the truth

is the truth; I cursed Hilary Hillyard for a cheat, and swore that I'd make him sweat a drop of his heart's blood for each and every dollar he was defrauding me of!"

The young man seemed unconscious of the fact that these passionate words might weigh heavily against him now, as in the days to come. He spoke with fiercely bitter emphasis, just as though he had forgotten yonder ghastly spectacle on the floor above.

Paulette and Prince interchanged looks, but neither spoke in comment, evidently deeming it wisest to let this witness say what he would, without prompting or guidance.

But Westlake said no more, just then. Possibly he had nothing more to say, or, it might be, awakening prudence told him he had already said too much for his own good.

So, at least, Chief Paulette interpreted that growing flush, those suddenly drooping lids. And when the silence had lasted sufficiently long to make it clear Westlake would volunteer nothing further, he said:

"Hillyard owed you a considerable sum of money, then? Of course you can have no objections to stating just how that debt was incurred, Mr. Westlake?"

Leonard stirred uneasily, flushed warmly, then turned pale again. His tones sounded husky when he slowly answered:

"I'd rather not say, sir. It's ugly work, this speaking evil of the dead, and I—Heaven knows *he* never treated me like a son should be treated; and now—let it pass, now, please, Paulette!"

There ensued a brief silence, broken at last by the chief.

"What can you tell us about the private habits of Mr. Hillyard, then? Does he make a practice of keeping any large amount of ready money in or about the house?"

"I don't know, as to that, sir."

"And jewelry, or precious stones?" persisted Paulette, although he could see Westlake was fidgeting restlessly beneath the inquisition.

"Ask the servants, sir, if you really wish for light on such points," the young man cried, rising impatiently to his feet. "How should I know? This has not been my home for years past! Even *you*, sir, can hardly be more of a stranger under the roof of the house for which my sainted mother's money paid, than I, her only living child!"

Chief Paulette turned toward the butler, who was standing near, and by means of a few crisp questions, carried his present point; yes, it was no unusual thing for the master to have both money and valuables cared for at the house, and there was a burglar-proof safe standing in his study, where all such valuables were bestowed.

With this information as a guide, Chief Paulette led the way to the apartment so designated by the butler, and closing the door behind all, his keen eyes went on a swift tour of inspection.

There was the usual amount of furniture and plenishings, but his eyes naturally rested chiefly upon the massive safe standing in one corner of the room, where the light from a lace-curtained window fell obliquely across its front.

One keen look, then Chief Paulette stepped swiftly forward, masking that door from other eyes with his own person until he could make sure he had not fallen into error.

No, there it still showed: something barely protruding from the jamb of the closed door of the safe!

A slight gesture brought Prince John to his side, and while their joined shapes cut off all vision as far as the other men went, another sign showed the detective that possible clue, even as Paulette grasped the plated knob and pulled the door open.

The safe was not locked, and this was easily done with one strong hand, its mate catching that object as it dropped free from the jaws of steel which had held it secure for his coming.

For the space of a single breath that tell-tale clue lay exposed on that brown palm, for two pair of keen eyes to note: a small button, such as are worn upon coat sleeves, and attached to it a bit of gray cloth.

That object vanished as by magic, and as Chief Paulette turned to gaze upon the

step-son of Hilary Hillyard, he saw a shapeless figure, clad in dark gray from neck to heels!

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHADOW GROWS DARK.

LEONARD WESTLAKE looked very pale, just then, and his tones were unusually husky as he spoke:

"Open—not locked? Then it *must* have been robbers!"

"Unless Mr. Hillyard forgot to lock it."

"Is that likely? And he such a close man of business? Forgot? *He* forget? That shows how little you really know of Hilary Hillyard, sir!"

There was a sneer underlying those words, and meeting the steady gaze of the chief, young Westlake turned abruptly away, as though unwilling or afraid to stand further inspection.

John Morris mumbled something as his young master brushed past him, but Westlake paid no heed, so far as outward notice went. He passed on to one of the curtained windows, and was just lifting a hand to sweep aside the costly lace hangings, when there came the rapid rumble of wheels and clattering of iron-shod hoofs on the paved road leading to the Hillyard mansion.

Pushing the curtain aside, Westlake looked out through the sash, and, a moment later, gave vent to a sharp, yet partly smothered ejaculation.

Prince John had hardly moved his gaze from face or figure since noting the article found by Chief Paulette in the safe door, and seeing that something fresh was almost certainly turning up just then, from the sudden change which came over that handsome face, he pressed forward, to glance past the shoulder of the young man.

He saw a close back just reined up in front of the house, out of which a well-dressed man was springing, looking back over shoulder as if flinging the driver directions, even as he sprang swiftly toward the front entrance.

"You know him; who is he?" asked the Insurance Detective, feeling that arm stiffen and its muscles swell as his trained fingers lightly closed upon that coat-sleeve.

"Oren Poole," muttered Westlake, in reply, turning from the window to face the closed door. "He's come back to—*has he heard so soon?*"

"What's that?" sharply demanded Chief Paulette, facing about from where he crouched, in front of the safe.

"Somebody coming, chief," answered Prince. "Oren Poole, he says."

"His step-son—the son of his last wife, sir," explained Westlake, in response to those questioning eyes.

From the front entrance now came the sound of sharp, excited if not angry tones, and rightly judging that this latest comer was urging his right to enter against the opposition of the policemen on guard, Chief Paulette stepped to the door, opening it and calling forth, clearly:

"What's the row, Jamison?"

"Gent here who says he's coming in, whether or no, sir."

"Wait a bit, please. You're in charge, Prince, until I get back."

Paulette left the room, closing the door as he passed out.

Prince John took note of the frown which wrinkled the brows of his present companion, and quietly spoke:

"No very dear friend of yours, I imagine, Westlake?"

"I'd never own as much to an honest man, if he was," came the blunt response.

"Yet you are relatives, after a fashion, too!"

"In no degree, sir. His mother married my step-father, but Oren Poole was nearly grown when that latest alliance was formed. *He* is no relative of mine, and I fancy he would be quite as swift to deny any such claim."

"Which means there's little love wasted between you, then?"

"Just that, sir! We never liked each other, but now—perhaps I'd better go, before he comes in here."

Westlake started toward the door, but the Insurance Detective put forth a detaining hand, saying:

"Not just yet, Mr. Westlake. Until

Chief Paulette returns, you will oblige me by keeping me company."

"Against my will, do you mean, sir?"

Prince John delayed long enough for those angry eyes to take note of his cool, half-quizzical smile, then slowly asked:

"Don't you reckon *with* your will sounds a bit more agreeable, dear fellow? And so, with your own free will you're kind enough to bear me company right here, I feel sure!"

A very transparent coating of sugar, but Leonard Westlake was keen enough to guess what lay beneath that coating, and though he turned abruptly away from that smiling visage, it was a turning away from the door as well.

Meanwhile Chief Paulette had passed along the wide hall to the front of the building, where the officer on duty was still holding Oren Poole at bay, greatly to that hot-tempered individual's disgust, if nothing more powerful.

The sound of voices had attracted several of the house servants toward the door, and as the officer turned to answer his superior, Poole vigorously pushed his way into the hall, speaking sharply as he caught sight of a familiar face:

"How now, Peridot? What's all this mean, anyhow? Where's your master, and what means—Where's Mr. Hillyard, I say, fool?"

"Gone—*murdered!*"

"What?" harshly cried the new-comer, with clinched right hand flying up and outward in a vicious gesture. "That devil surely hasn't—"

Oren Poole cut himself short as his fairly blazing eyes caught sight of the tall, massive shape of the head of police, and then he uttered, quickly:

"What! You here, Chief Paulette?"

"I am here, certainly, Mr. Poole, just as you are here. May I ask—"

"What's all this I hear, Paulette?" impetuously broke forth the young man, paying heed to none other just then, moving nearer the high official. "This horrible rumor about my father? He's not—Surely it is all a hideous mistake? All a devilish lie, man alive?"

"What have you heard, first, please?"

"That Hilary Hillyard, my step-father, is dead—some say by his own hand, others by that of accident, still others that he has been murdered by—by some foul-hearted assassin! It's *not* true—any part of it, Paulette?"

There was a slight delay in answering this excited appeal, but then the chief of police made reply:

"It's well that you've been in a measure prepared for the worst, Mr. Poole, for it's only too true that harm has befallen your step-father. In short—well, he is dead!"

Oren Poole flinched visibly before those reluctant words, but he rallied as swiftly, and his voice was fairly steady as he demanded to be shown the remains.

"It's *my* right, sir, and I'll hold out for it!" he sternly added, naturally misinterpreting that hesitation. "Where is—*it*? Up stairs, in his chamber, or—Tell me, sir, if you're afraid or ashamed to lead the way!"

Chief Paulette flushed a bit at this speech, although he was usually proof against aught which hot or venomous tongue could shape, but that last sentence banished his reluctance to show a son such a grimly repulsive sight.

"I'll show you the way, sir, since you'd hardly gain admittance without my word or presence. This way, please," and turning to mount the stairs, Paulette led the way direct to the chamber of death.

The coroner had not yet returned, and the policeman was still on guard before that smoke-stained door.

At a sign from his superior, the officer stepped aside, and turning the knob, the chief swung the door open, then, as he waved a hand in that direction, said:

"You demanded this, sir; now—will you enter?"

As a rule, Oren Poole did not lack the fresh hues of physical health, although his complexion was very fair, he being a blond of almost perfect type; but now his countenance showed waxily pale, and he even shrunk back a bit, partly averting his face as a noisome odor came through that opening in the wall.

He was tall, of athletic build, giving

evidence of far more than ordinary strength of body and limb, yet without being too heavily built for either activity or graceful movement.

His complexion was almost womanishly fair, but his smoothness of skin was beginning to fail him under the ravages of dissipation, and leaden crescents were beginning to show beneath his big blue eyes.

All this the police chief took in during that recoil; but rallying his courage, Oren Poole stepped over the threshold, and slowly approached that gruesome object still lying where discovered, on the ruins of his bedding.

Under the steady gaze of Paulette, Oren bent closer over the body, touching the charred and shriveled right hand, on one finger of which showed the still bright gold of a heavy seal ring.

A stifled groan escaped his lips as he recognized this mute evidence, but, as though not yet convinced he viewed the flame-marred corpse from head to foot, plainly comparing its dimensions with a mental photograph of his step-father.

He shuddered as he took note of that cruel cleft through scalp and shroug skull—a wound sufficient to let out a full score of lives, could so many have been contained within that now insensate body!

Paulette said nothing until young Poole drew back, seemingly satisfied with his inspection. Then the official asked:

"You can identify the body, Mr. Poole?"

"How can any one doubt?" came the answer.

"You *do* recognize it, then?"

"Yes, I *do* recognize it, sir."

"By what means, please?"

"By its being found here, in my step-father's bed, for one thing; but that isn't the strongest proof. Look!" pointing to the heavy seal ring which at least one other had identified that morning. "There's the ring which father has worn for more years than I can recall! And—how many other men ever carried that gallant figure? Who else could boast of shoulders like those? Who else owned such a powerful frame, from crown to sole? And now—heaven rest his poor soul!"

With a sudden break in his voice, Oren turned away from that awful witness against some man as yet unnamed, and almost blindly made his way through the opening door, gasping as if for fresh air when he paused at the head of the broad flight of stairs once more.

Chief Paulette followed closely, making a silent signal to the policeman, who at once resumed his station in front of that dread chamber door.

Oren leaned heavily on the balusters as he slowly descended the stairs, his head bowed and his lids partially closed.

It seemed as though he had been completely overcome by that awful vision, although he had borne up so gallantly under the terrible strain until fully convinced that the very worst he had heard was too true. The police chief feared that the young man would fall, and to guard against such an accident, gently placed one powerful hand on an arm as he gained a level with the other gentleman.

Young Poole gave a slight start at that touch, but, a quickening glow leaped into his dulled eyes as he recognized that strong, soldier-like face; and instantly his bodily powers seemed to rally again.

He passed down to the broad hall-way, then almost fiercely turning to face the chief, he demanded:

"Where is he? Haven't you arrested him yet, sir?"

"Arrested whom?"

"The devilish assassin whose merciless hand has wrought all this horror, of course! Have you arrested him, I repeat? If not—"

"What do you mean, Poole?" sternly queried the chief, steel-like fingers closing upon an arm the better to force attention. "If you know whose hand wrought this ugly work, why—"

"If I know?" with a short, fierce laugh. "Whose hand *could* have done it? Whose hand *would* have done it, then?"

"That's just what I'm asking you, sir. Whom do you accuse of killing Hilary Hillyard, your step-father, then?"

"Leonard Westlake, the son of Hilary

Hillyard's first wife!" fiercely answered the young man, with fist gesticulating the while. "I accuse Leonard Westlake of this devilish deed and I demand his arrest in the name of an outraged law! I swear that Leonard Westlake murdered my step-father, and—"

So far the excited man had spoken, when a half-stifled cry came to the ears of both men as they stood there in the broad hall, and as their eyes instinctively turned in that direction, the door of the study was flung violently open, and the pale, agitated face of Leonard Westlake showed itself in that aperture.

A moment's surprised glare, then Oren Poole gave vent to a hoarse cry of vengeance, and leaping forward, closed in deadly grapple with Westlake.

CHAPTER V.

CHARGED WITH MURDER.

It was not often that Virgo Paulette was taken off his guard, but this was one of those exceptional cases, for thought itself could hardly work more swiftly than Oren Poole acted, fairly flinging himself upon that pale-faced figure showing at the doorway of the dead man's study.

Both went down together, tight locked in what might have proved a death-struggle had no interference come to balk; but that did come, in the shape of the Insurance Detective, before Chief Paulette could fairly realize what was happening.

"Play easy, ye fools!" sharply cried John Prince as he made his rush, swift and powerful, those shapely hands closing upon the savagely struggling men, tearing them apart as though they were naught but children in his mighty grip. "Let up, or— Care for him, chief, will you?"

"As he spoke, Prince John flung Oren Poole away with seeming ease, then bent his energies toward mastering Leonard Westlake, paying no further attention to the athletic blond.

Oren fell into the stern grip of Chief Paulette before that dizzying fling had lost its power, and those muscular arms held him helpless in spite of his struggle to break away.

"He did it! I'll kill him for— Take him, I say! He killed father Hillyard! Take him, or I'll— Let up, curse you, Paulette!"

"Let up you, or worse'll come of it," sternly retorted the chief of police, holding his man powerless, and seeing that Prince John was finding no particular difficulty in mastering his game.

The policeman on duty at the front entrance came with a rush, but his assistance was not required, just then, and his superior officer grimly intimated as much.

"It's all right, Jamison. Back to your post, and never heed this bit of squabble. And you, Oren Poole—"

"Devil a care do I care, just so you don't let that scoundrel slip through—"

"You lie when you dare even hint it, Oren Poole!" hoarsely panted Leonard Westlake, yielding to the detective, but fiercely defiant so far as this enemy was concerned.

"I'm not giving a hint, you villain, but making a blunt charge, and if these fellows are anything like honest men, they'll back me up in it, too!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Poole?" demanded Chief Paulette, holding his grip yet treating the angry man as a gentleman rather than as a prisoner.

A forced laugh broke from the lips of the other step-son at this.

"You're worse than wasting your time if you listen to him, Paulette. He was born a liar, and has kept gaining every day since!"

"It's no lie when I charge you with foully murdering Hilary Hillyard!" savagely retorted Poole.

"I never—it's a lie, black as your foul heart, Oren Poole!"

"It's a truth which'll carry you to the gallows, Len. Westlake! I make the charge, gentlemen! He murdered my poor father, and I demand his arrest as the devilish assassin who— Take him, I say! Down him! Clap him in irons, or I'll fill all Frisco with your shame as—ah-h-h!"

A choking gurgle cut short his furious tirade, and with relaxing muscles Oren

Poole leaned heavily against Paulette, like one on the very verge of physical collapse.

The accused began a no less fierce denial, but Prince John slipped a firm palm across his lips, quickly saying:

"Don't make a bad matter worse, my good fellow. Saying isn't proving, and until that sure proof is furnished, your neck stands no risk of wearing a hempen collar."

"I never—before high Heaven, sir, I never harmed Hillyard!"

"Then he can only harm himself by swearing you did, don't you see?" coolly argued the Insurance Detective. "Cool off, man! Better have all this muddle cleared away here and now, than later on before a court of justice!"

Paulette was taking pretty much the same tack, and thanks to these cool heads and strong hands, what had bidden fair to result in another tragedy, now promised to end in mutual explanations.

When calm had been restored, outwardly at least, the chief said in low, grave tones:

"We'd better adjourn to a more favorable place, I fancy. Too much has been said not to say more, but there's no necessity for our taking the entire establishment into our confidence. Eh, Prince?"

The officer on duty at the front grew more rigidly erect at this, and the servant who had been attracted by the sound of angry voices if not of that brief struggle itself, shrunk timidly back.

Prince John smiled as his glance took these notes; then he nodded toward the still open door of the dead man's study.

"In yonder, chief?"

"Just as well, I reckon. Go on; we'll follow you."

Westlake yielded to the gentle force which the Prince exerted, and soon the quartette were closeted together behind closed doors.

All faces were grave, and two of them were unusually pale, for all felt that a crisis was close at hand, the result of which might be death to at least one of their number.

Paulette signed the step-sons to chairs, but neither took advantage of that silent courtesy, both remaining erect, ready for attack or for defense.

Though brief-lived, that silence was becoming oppressive, and the head of the San Francisco's protective force spoke up:

"You have made use of stern words, Mr. Poole, but you are old enough to realize that such ugly charges should be backed up by solid proof?"

"I'm responsible for all I say or do, sir," answered the other, with real or well-assumed calmness. "Shall I repeat my accusation, then?"

"Perhaps 'twould be best for you to show some good grounds for making such a serious charge, first. Of course you can do that?"

"Not without adding fresh lies to those he's already spat forth!" cried the accused, twin spots of red coming to his cheeks.

"Patience, please, Mr. Westlake!" urged the official. "Surely you would prefer listening to and refuting such a charge here, in privacy, to being arrested and put to a regular examination."

"And that's what will have to be done unless you act decent, pardner," murmured Prince John, in the ear of his especial charge. "Make him show his hand, and then call him—if you hold the cards to justify you in doing that!"

Leonard Westlake turned partly away, as though to lessen fierce temptation; then he stood in grim silence, his arms folded across his chest, his hands tightly clinched.

It was the attitude of stern defiance, but Prince John smiled faintly as he took that note. After all, it was not so easy to believe this man guilty of such a diabolical crime.

"We're ready, whenever you are, Mr. Poole," said Paulette, a few seconds later on.

"What am I to say? Where am I to begin?"

"Use your own judgment, sir. What we wish, first of all, is to get at the bottom facts of this ugly affair. If you can throw any light upon the killing of Hilary Hillyard, 'tis your bounded duty to do so, without taking thought as to the consequences. Now, what do you *know* about all this, Mr. Poole?"

"To make a beginning, then, gentlemen, I know that there has been bad blood between my poor father and yonder—and Leonard Westlake, for a number of years past. They have quarreled repeatedly, and father has time and again declared his belief that the day would dawn which would show himself a corpse—killed by the hand of yonder villain!"

Wait: not yet!" commanded the Prince, hand on arm as Westlake turned upon his enemy with a smothered growl of fierce rage. "What were all these quarrels based upon, Mr. Poole?"

"Mainly money matters, I believe, sir, but not altogether. Westlake always hated father, and never met him without making threats of some description, until—"

"Stop right there, you scoundrel!" sternly interposed the accused. "The truth is bad enough, without your adding false colors."

"Dare you deny those quarrels, those threats, Len. Westlake?"

"On the contrary, I admit them! What I deny is your twisting lies into the place of facts. To you, gentlemen, I'll tell it all, without disguise or masking."

"I quarreled with Hilary Hillyard simply because he owed me money which he refused to pay over. I'm no saint. I admit that I've gone tolerably deep into debt, but not so far that I couldn't pay and still have a goodly sum left over, if I could only get my just dues from that—from Mr. Hillyard, I should say."

"And to secure those dues, real or pretended, you murdered my poor father?" sneered Poole. "Has yonder safe been examined, chief? If not—"

"Go easy, please!" interrupted Paulette, hand closing on arm by way of lending emphasis to his words. "It's fact not insinuation we're wanting now, bear in mind."

"All right, and facts go!" retorted Poole, with grim emphasis, as one hand slipped into his bosom, seemingly in quest of some hidden object.

"As you know, chief, my mother is—or was—the wife or Hilary Hillyard. Her health has not been of the best for some little time, and thinking that a little change might work her good, she determined to pay a visit to friends at Sacramento City."

"At her request I bore her company, and when we left here I confidently expected to remain away from San Francisco at least a fortnight. Instead of that—here I am!"

"What reasons brought you back, Mr. Poole?"

"That's a portion of the solid facts you begged for, chief, and what I'm coming to, right now," grimly emphasized the witness, hand still in bosom.

"I went to Sacramento City with mother, as I told you, but we'd only been there two days, when a letter came to my address. Hilary Hillyard wrote that letter, and in it he vowed he feared for his life, for he'd had fresh trouble with Leonard Westlake."

"Careful, you villain!" warned the accused.

"I'm giving solid facts, and I've got the solid proofs to back up every word I now utter," asserted the accuser, then facing Chief Paulette once more, to add:

"In that letter Hilary Hillyard swore that he lived in constant fear of his life, and solemnly charged me to bear in mind his words: if aught should happen to him, I must look to Leonard Westlake for an explanation, for he firmly believed that the scoundrel would murder him yet!"

With difficulty the accused had restrained himself through all this, but now he asked, in low, strained tones:

"Must I bear this, and say nothing, do nothing? Shall I bow beneath his vile insinuations, his viler lies, and let him go scot free?"

"Patience, Mr. Westlake. Your turn shall follow, but just now—you say you received a letter containing such fears, Mr. Poole?"

"Written by Hilary Hillyard—yes."

"Of course you would not think of destroying such a letter while any such doubt remained? You still possess that letter, then?"

"At your service, chief," and that hidden hand came forth, holding an addressed envelope. "Judge for yourself, please!"

Without changing a muscle of his countenance, Chief Paulette took the bit of paper which might prove an assassin's death-warrant, looking carefully over the outside before going further.

It was directed to Oren Poole, at Sacramento City, with street and number, and bore the genuine postmark of both dispatching and receiving office. So far, at least, there was naught to complain of on the score of regularity or genuineness.

The envelope was slit at one end, and inserting thumb and forefinger, Chief Paulette drew forth the folded sheet, opening it and slowly mastering its contents, written in a bold yet peculiar hand; one which would be especially difficult to counterfeit with success.

Waiting until those keen eyes reached that odd-looking signature, Oren Poole spoke again:

"You can judge how powerfully the receipt of such a letter affected me, chief; and none the less because fear for my mother's nerves compelled me to keep the knowledge to myself."

"Knowing as I did how bitterly the two men had quarreled, it was easier for me to comprehend a fear such as my father plainly held; but I'd be lying if I said that I really feared murder—just then!"

"Yet you cut your visit short and hastened back home?"

"In hopes of soothing and relieving my father's fears, yes, sir. And instead of that, I found—that, up yonder!" with an accusing hand lifting toward the chamber of death, then turning a quivering finger toward the pale face of the younger step-son, to add in stern, harsh tones:

"I accuse Leonard Westlake of foulest murder! Arrest him—now!"

CHAPTER VI.

A GENEROUS OFFER REJECTED.

THOUGH looking almost corpse-like in his extreme pallor, Leonard Westlake stood proudly erect through all this, never flinching an atom, even when finger and voice both singled him out as the cruel assassin.

"Take him!" repeated Oren Poole, with even greater venom in voice than before. "There's the murderer of my father, Hilary Hillyard: arrest him, in the name of the law!"

Swift as thought itself Leonard Westlake sprang forward, sending out a hard-clinched fist as he came, striking his accuser squarely between the eyes, knocking him backward, clean off his feet.

Recoiling just as swiftly, and holding up an open hand by way of truce, Westlake rapidly spoke:

"That's my answer to him, but to you, gentlemen—this!"

"Before Heaven I'm guiltless of this deed, and I swear to prove my innocence before the law and all mankind! But if I'm to suffer arrest for a crime of which I'm as innocent as a babe unborn, let it be in strict accordance with the law, gentlemen."

The half-stunned accuser here gave a sound, part groan, part curse, and with some difficulty struggled to a sitting posture, hands clasping his head as though striving to steady a whirling brain.

Westlake's lips curled back from his strong white teeth as he cast a look of blended rage, hatred and contempt upon the step-son of his step-father, then spoke again:

"I'll never submit to the will of a lying cur like Oren Poole, and don't you think it, gentlemen! If you try to arrest me on his bare word, I'll fight you to the very death, although you call all the police of Frisco to back you up!"

"Take him—why don't you down him?" huskily muttered the still confused man, seated there near the wall whither that vengeful blow had hurled him, endlong.

"If we have to take you, Westlake—"

"Do it in regular form, then, but you can't do it on that lying cur's bare word," coldly interjected the accused, slowly moving toward the door of the study as he added: "Nor will I submit to arrest at all, now, unless you can produce a warrant. Get that, then I'll submit to arrest without making a kick."

He paused, long enough to flash a keen

look from face to face, then added in those same cold, grim tones:

"I'm going, now, gentlemen. You can stop me with a bullet, but nothing shorter. Good-day to you both!"

Pale but firm, Leonard Westlake moved across the room to turn the door-knob, and neither chief nor detective lifted hand or spoke word to check that exit.

Oren Poole began to realize what was taking place, and with an ugly oath he staggered to his feet, harshly demanding the arrest; but before he could do more, Chief Paulette let fall a heavy hand upon his shoulder, and drew the maddened man back again.

"There's time enough for all that," coldly observed the chief of police, as Leonard Westlake opened the barrier and passed through into the hall. "I'll know where to look for the gentleman if he should be wanted."

Westlake caught those words distinctly enough, but gave no sign of either anger or thankfulness, striding swiftly along the hall to the front door, where Officer Jamison still held his post.

"Let me pass, please," said the young man, putting out a hand as if to shove the stalwart officer aside. "I've got more important business elsewhere. Give way, please, sir!"

Jamison stepped aside, but it was not in obedience to that calm request. Chief Paulette stood in the open doorway beyond, making a sign to grant that exit.

Like one who neither saw nor heard, Leonard Westlake passed through the front door descended the stone steps, striding rapidly along the neatly-kept gravel walk leading out of the grounds.

But before he had won fairly clear of those grounds, the reaction began to show itself, and those steps slackened, those strides grew less firm and steady, that proud, defiantly-erect head to bow a bit, until the young man against whom such a black crime had been urged, staggered almost like one under the influence of strong drink.

Muttered words passed his lips, but so thickly, so indistinct, that they could hardly be called words. He shivered now and then, drawing up his shoulders like one smitten by an acute chill; yet a moment later a trembling hand was lifted to brush from his forehead great drops of sweat.

Leonard Westlake had spoken glibly enough of important business which called him away from the house of tragedy, but now that he had won his liberty so far, he showed no such haste, he moved like one in a dream or a daze, and it may well be doubted whether he knew in which direction his uncertain steps were carrying him.

Still like one wrapped in a half-waking dream, the young man heard the rapid clatter of approaching hoof-strokes, losing their perfect rhythm as nervous hands sharply jerked at the pliant ribbons, bringing the spirited span of matched ponies to a halt close abreast of Leonard Westlake.

"Leonard—Mr. Westlake!"

He gave a start, brushing an unsteady hand across his eyes while staring almost vacantly around.

That sound—that voice—surely he knew—Again that name, this time joined to a half-sobbing cry: and with those strange, unwonted mists vanishing from his eyes, Leonard Westlake recognized the speaker; the one woman in all the wide world for him, just then!

"Ethelyn! You—and here?" he cried, huskily, springing from pave to street, his pale face winning a warm flush as his hands went out longingly toward this idol of his heart.

"For you—looking for and praying to meet you, Leonard!" came the response, in even more agitated tones.

Remembrance flashed back, and the young man flinched as from a blow in the face, turning pale again, then muttering, huskily:

"You know—you've heard how—Ethelyn, am I—"

"Would I say or do this if I thought—that?" the woman spoke, forcing a smile as she added a gesture: "Come—beside me, Leonard! Be quick, dear! Come—now—with me, darling!"

Something in her tones or in her look around caused the man to glance around in

all directions. He saw moving shapes, but without pausing to ascertain whether or no they were officers in search of himself as an accused assassin, Westlake sprang into the phaeton beside the lady, who instantly wheeled her ponies, then sent them along the well-paved street at a spanking pace.

Neither spoke for some time.

Ethelyn Garland was busy keeping her spirited span at top speed, yet holding them under perfect control.

Leonard Westlake was clear-witted enough now to realize something of the truth. He knew that this, his best beloved, the woman whom he held fond hopes of one day—and that day not so far distant in the future—making his wife, had heard at least part of his sore trouble; and that knowledge put a clog upon his tongue.

What should he say? How best defend himself? For, unless Ethelyn actually feared for his liberty, if not for his life, why was she driving at such an unusual pace? Why was she racing on like this, heading away from the city, toward the wide, sandy-beached bay?

Surely she could not think him guilty of such an infamous crime?

And yet—if not, why this headlong flight?

For a few minutes a dull, heart-sickening dread held him speechless in the presence of his betrothed, for if she deemed him guilty, what would be the ending of that drive? At the end—parting, forever?

"You have heard, then, Ethelyn?" Westlake forced himself to ask, at length; for surely any certainty would be better than this suspense.

"About Mr. Hillyard? Yes, I have heard—something!"

How altered her voice sounded! How cold—how distant her manner seemed to his over-wrought fancy!

Surely she deemed him guilty, else why did her loved eyes refuse to turn his way, to meet his loving look?

Hardly conscious of his own words, Leonard Westlake began defending himself from that terrible charge, but long before his full meaning could have been made clear, he was checked by the maiden, whose great black eyes turned that way, whose beautiful face lit up with a loving smile as she softly breathed:

"Not now, dear! Later on, perhaps, but not just now."

Just then Leonard Westlake could better have borne words and looks of suspicion or scorn, for his nerves had been sorely tried of late.

He sunk back in those soft, rich cushions: fit furniture for the queenly heiress who sat there so proudly erect, managing her swiftly trotting span of ponies, with the fresh, salty breeze fanning her face as it came in through the far-off Golden Gate.

Ethelyn Garland, sole child of Thurlow Garland, railroad king and mining magnate, was indeed an heiress; yet love had passed her way, and turned her maiden heart toward the handsome and almost penniless young lawyer, Leonard Westlake.

Although that affection had not yet been openly admitted, it had become an open secret, and having duly wondered and regretted, society was placidly waiting the announcement of Ethelyn Garland's engagement.

The young lawyer caught his breath sharply as these reflections flashed across his busy brain, in company with others; for one, a memory of his last evening in Ethelyn's company, when he had so confidently assured her that with another four-and-twenty hours he would stand clear of all debt, and so feel more fit to face stern Father Garland and beg of him his richest, best, most precious treasure.

And now—ugh!

Not another word was spoken until Ethelyn drew up her froth-flecked ponies on the beach, pointing with her ribbon-decked whip out to where a shapely yacht was resting at anchor, with the merest haze hovering over her smoke-stacks, as a token that fires were not out, but banked and ready for getting up steam in all haste.

"There! Go aboard, take command, steam for safety, my love!" the young woman said, huskily, her eyes abrim with tears as they turned upon his countenance, but

through all showing the power of pure, perfect love.

Westlake flinched from her, his face turning still paler, for he could no longer disguise the bitter truth: Ethelyn believed him guilty of that heinous crime!

"You really mean it, Miss Garland?" he forced himself to ask, though his voice sounded strange to his own ears just then.

"You would have me flee, like a cur—like a veritable assassin? You—you?"

But the maiden neither blushed for shame nor shrunk away in repulsion. Instead, her hands dropped whip and reins, to rest confidently on his shoulders, while her red lips touched his, then drew back a bit to distinctly utter the words:

"I know you never did that—I know you are free from even the shadow of guilt, darling! Yet—go, for my sake, dear! Go, while you may, and so hold your freedom until we can make all the world see the clear truth as we see it!"

"All is ready, and only waiting for your coming. I sent word to the captain to prepare all, else I would have been with you sooner. Now—good-by, my darling! Good-by, until—"

His lips closed here and cut that parting speech short. For a full half minute thus, thinking not, caring naught for what eyes might be upon them just then; but at the end of that blissful space, Leonard Westlake drew back, arms yet clasping that superb figure to his swelling breast, to slowly pronounce:

"If I go, must it be alone, Ethelyn? Must I leave you here, possibly to never meet again? For—if I flee thus, darling, it can only be to escape the gallows!"

"For a deed your hand never wrought, my king," said the maiden, her loving faith proof against even that half-admission of guilt.

"And you—must I go alone, Ethelyn?" repeated Westlake, his eyes glowing vividly as they gazed into hers, sounding those pure depths. "I will never do that, then! Rather arrest—rather death on the gallows than leave you here, perhaps forever, my love!"

A barely perceptible hesitation, then the maiden made answer:

"You must go, Leonard, and since—with you, then, my king! Come! I will go—and only for poor father, I'd go without a single regret!"

Instantly those strong arms clasped her to their owner's heart, and after a passionate kiss, there came the fond words:

"My love, my angel of truth and trust! I was only trying your faith, Ethelyn, for—not flight, but facing the music, for me!"

Catching up the lines, he turned the ponies toward the city, adding:

"I've done nothing to flee from, Ethelyn, but if I had, still I'd say what I say now: better die as a man, than live as a dog!"

CHAPTER VII.

THIEF, AS WELL AS ASSASSIN.

OREN POOLE seemed greatly taken aback by the non-arrest of the one whom he so persistently accused of being the slayer of the man who had been step-father to them both; but the massive figure of Chief Paulette blocked the doorway, while the alert detective stood hard by, ready as willing to play whatever part might be assigned him.

Then, too, that vengeful blow had been a heavy one, coming as it did without warning, and Poole had not yet fully recovered from the shock of the stroke and jarring fall.

As soon as he could fully realize the truth, however, he broke forth into speech which certainly could not be termed complimentary toward the head of police, and even started toward Chief Paulette as though he intended dashing aside that human barricade, in order to follow after his enemy.

"Why did you let him run away? I tell you he's the devilish assassin who butchered—hands off, I say!"

But Prince John simply tightened his grip, and athlete though he had long prided himself on being, Oren Poole instinctively knew that now he had fallen into the hands of his master.

Then, too, Chief Paulette turned that way from the door, gently closing that barrier, a grave smile coming to his face as he spoke in lowered tones:

"I hardly think it's a case of flight through fear of the law, my dear sir, but if so—well, what better proof of guilt would you wish for than that same flight?"

"What do I ask for? For vengeance, sir! For justice! He pitilessly butchered my mother's husband, and now—gone, free as pure air! Oh, I could curse my folly for not nailing him fast the first glimpse I had of the infernal scoundrel! And I would—only for you!"

With an effort Oren Poole freed his arm from the Insurance Detective's grasp, facing the two men in his fierce disappointment, seeming to regard them as personal enemies rather than not.

"You helped him away, when by all rights you ought to have been the very first to clap him in irons! And now—where is he, I ask you?"

"Where he'll be readily found whenever wanted, never fear, Mr. Poole," calmly answered Chief Paulette. "I answer for that, you understand?"

"But why—why not hang fast to him when he was here?"

Again that passing smile, while those deep-set eyes seemed to win fresh fire before the deliberate answer crossed those thin lips:

"Did you never hear tell of loaning a man rope to hang himself with, Mr. Poole?"

Only those few words, but they proved quite sufficient to calm that hot blood, and Oren Poole fell back a bit, brushing a hand over his face as though sweeping aside all unpleasant mists.

In the same low, measured tones Chief Paulette added:

"Of course if you see fit to swear out a warrant and offer it for service in due form, Mr. Poole, I'll have to arrest Leonard Westlake, but otherwise I'd prefer to wait for a little more light on this subject. I speak with perfect frankness, you observe?"

"It sounds like it, and yet—have you examined the safe, yonder?"

Oren Poole motioned toward that article as he abruptly shifted the subject, but Chief Paulette was hardly one to be caught off his guard during business hours, or while in harness, and he evasively answered:

"Time enough for that, sir. Do you know whether Mr. Hillyard kept that safe here for the purpose of holding valuables—other than documents, I mean, of course?"

"Father often had large sums of ready cash here, although he ran a regular bank account, of course," said Poole, moving toward the safe. "But before I say anything more on that score, please open this, chief!"

One hand struck the enameled metal sharply, but neither knob nor door, as though its owner was determined to make these officials take and keep the lead henceforth.

"Will you please try the door, sir?" he repeated in his hot impatience, as Chief Paulette showed no signs of haste.

"If locked—do you know the combination, Mr. Poole?"

"No, but unless—look, then!"

Like one who held implicit faith in his own strong suspicions, Oren Poole moved to leave the other men a free view, then grasped the plated knob, gave it a quick turn and a strong pull, catching his breath sharply as the heavy mass of admirably poised metal swung open.

"You see? Look—look closely, gentlemen!" came hoarsely from his lips as he drew still further back for their convenience. "I knew that it would—What have you found, then, chief?"

Almost feverishly came the question, but Oren Poole merely bent his head and shoulders forward, his hands gripping each other nervously, something like a shiver agitating his muscular frame.

The Insurance Detective was making more use of his eyes than of his tongue on this occasion, keeping himself in the background, yet taking care to let nothing of importance escape his notice.

Somehow he was far less favorably impressed with this step-son of the dead man, than he had been with the other, or Leonard Westlake. That fact may account for his watching Poole so critically throughout this

latest scene, and may have aided in shaping those swift reflections.

"What is he expecting? Anything more than a simple theft? Does he know anything about that sleeve-button? Can it be that he—steady, my boy!"

So ran those thoughts, but nothing was shown on the surface to betray either doubts or surveillance as the Insurance Detective stood at ease there in partial shadow.

Past all doubt, Oren Poole was betraying strong agitation of some quality, but—was it simply a natural shock at finding his worst suspicions in a fair way of being confirmed, or had he been expecting even more than this?

"Was he expecting to find proof that Westlake had been inside the safe? If so, what sort of proof? And—how could he know anything about it if he just came here from Sacramento?"

That eager stare and consequent recoil lasted over hardly half a score seconds, although that gave the Insurance Detective time enough for both questions and deductions.

Then, rallying quickly, Oren Poole spoke again to Paulette:

"Examine the safe, sir, and don't let aught escape your notice! Remember how much may depend upon—Do you find aught, then?"

"Nothing more than one might expect to find in a home safe, so far, Mr. Poole," calmly answered the other, with a wave of a hand toward that partially exposed interior. "I hardly think the safe was forced, else there would be some signs of violence."

"He may have found the safe open, or else have learned the combination in some manner. Never mind that, just now: has there been robbery added to murder, chief?"

"Is that so readily decided, Mr. Poole? I see no signs of forcible entry, and—if we could learn just what this safe contained of value, then we'd have something to go upon!"

"I know that father habitually kept ready money here, sometimes even a very large amount of both gold and paper. There—in the drawer back of that smaller door—look in yonder, please!"

Oren Poole spoke with forced composure, but one far less critical than Prince John would have seen how stern was the rein thus held, how difficult a matter it was for this man to maintain even so much of his fictitious composure.

A small brass key showed at one edge of the inner door to which Oren Poole was pointing, and testing this, Chief Paulette found the bolt shot back.

The door swung noiselessly open, and then the receptacle was moved sufficiently to show—naught but emptiness!

Oren Poole caught his breath with a sharp gasp, then drew back with hand clinching and shaking in the direction of the front door, a short, harsh laugh parting his mustached lips the while. Then—

"Thief, as well as assassin, Len. Westlake! I knew it! I knew all this was your devilish work the moment I caught the black rumor of—I knew then, what I more than know now—you killed the poor old man for the gold you falsely charged him with holding back from your grasp!"

There was no attempt made to cut that savage outburst short, but as his own fierce rage seemed to choke off further speech, Chief Paulette gravely warned the step-son:

"Don't let your passion run away with your better judgment, Mr. Poole, or you may see cause for regret, when too late."

"I'll take my oath that he did it all!"

"If you can back up your words by oath, so much the better for you, Mr. Poole. I simply thought it my duty to remind you that this is a case for the coroner, and that you will be summoned as a witness, of course."

Oren Poole grew calmer under that grave tone, but even smiled faintly as he frankly met that keen, steady gaze!

"I ask nothing better than to be summoned, sir, and while I thank you for the friendly warning, 'twas never needed. I know that Leonard Westlake butchered Hilary Hillyard, and—here is the proof, in that rifled drawer—added theft to murder!"

"Hard words, my dear sir!"

"I'll make them still harder if I can train my tongue between now and the inquest!"

almost viciously declared the young man. "Len. Westlake is a cur, evil to his heart's core, and I'll never know rest or quiet again until the whole truth is brought to light! I'll never let up for a single moment until I've run him down to the gallows!"

Neither Paulette nor Prince tried to check this tirade, since Oren Poole had received full warning and surely was old enough to realize the full weight of such words as he saw fit to shape.

Having said his say for the time being, the young man calmed down once more, and after another searching glance inside the opened safe, he spoke with a more natural tone:

"May I ask if you have already questioned the servants, chief?"

"As to what particular point, Mr. Poole?"

"About this—about Westlake and my poor father, of course?"

"Well, yes, I've asked a few questions," admitted Paulette. "Still, I'll not say but that there may be more to be gleaned from that quarter, by getting about it rightly."

"May I speak to the butler—John Morris—in your presence, of course, sir?"

"I can see no reason for objecting to that, sir," with a quick look around the room, which was answered by Prince John:

"He's not here now, chief. Shall I call him in, or would you prefer going to look him up yourself?"

"Have you any choice as to that, Mr. Poole?" asked Paulette.

"Not at all, unless—oughtn't you to look a bit more carefully into this safe business, sir?" with an uneasy glance that way.

"All right: we'll go find the fellow, then. You first, gentlemen, and I'll turn the key, to make all secure in here until we've more spare time."

"'Twas done as said, and with Oren Poole in the lead, search was begun for John Morris, the butler.

That was of brief duration, for he was discovered in the great dining-room, still a prey to strong agitation if not of sore grief. His red and mottled face lost color as he saw who entered the apartment, and for a moment or two it really appeared as though he was tempted to seek immunity in flight; but if this was really the case, he quickly thought better of it, and with a forced composure saluted the gentlemen.

"Look here, Morris," bluntly began Poole, right forefinger quivering in front as though to lend emphasis to his words. "This is a mighty ugly business, and if you can throw any light upon it, it's your sworn duty to tell—When was Westlake here last, John?"

Sharp and stern rung forth his voice, and one who listened might easily have thought he was putting a guilty man to the question.

The butler flinched a bit, but not enough to convict himself in impartial eyes, then he made answer in husky tones:

"Last evening, sir. Only he never—"

"Stick to the point, Morris, and never you mind offering wild guesses or foolish fancies. Westlake was here last evening, you say, then?"

"Yes, sir. Last evening, sir."

"And he held an interview with my father—with Mr. Hillyard?"

The butler bowed assent. His face was growing still paler, and in spite of his evident efforts to the contrary, he seemed about losing even that poor, forced composure before those glowing eyes.

"He was with Mr. Hillyard, then? And they quarreled, as usual, John? Tell the truth, you villain!" with sudden fire, as the butler shrunk away and drooped his heavy lids.

"They had a row, didn't they, then?"

"No worse than usual, sir," stammered Morris, plainly against his will. "Nothing to speak of, that is. And—that's all, sir!"

But Oren Poole was not so readily satisfied on so vital a point as this, and the next instant he had Morris by an arm, shaking him fiercely.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DAMNING BIT OF EVIDENCE.

"You're holding something, John Morris!" sternly cried the young man, left hand shaking menacingly in front of that scared, troubled face the while. "What are you

trying to hide, you villain? Out with it, I say! Tell the truth, or I'll—Will you speak, then?"

"Easy, Mr. Poole," interposed Chief Paulette, admonishingly. "You're letting temper run away with judgment, and making matters worse instead of mending them. Off grip, please!"

Oren Poole removed his hand at that light yet imperious touch, and the chief of police took up the questioning himself.

"You say that Mr. Westlake was here last night, Morris? Well, at what hour did he take his departure, please?"

Was it a remnant of the fear inspired by that fierce assault which Oren Poole had made, or was it fear of still older, deeper root that caused the butler to flinch, and pale and catch his breath with so painful a gasp, just then?

Keenly watching all, Prince John asked himself this question, but before he could fairly answer it, Morris rallied, to huskily mumble:

"'Twas nearly twelve by the hall clock, sir."

"Be careful, John!" sharply cut in Poole.

"'Twas nearly twelve by the hall clock, sir," repeated the butler, with steadier, clearer tones. "I know, for I let him out, sir, my own self. The clock struck before I left the hall, sir: struck twelve o'clock, sir."

"You are quite positive as to the hour, then, Morris?"

"'Twas just going on for midnight, sir," doggedly insisted the old man. "I can't say any different from that, sir, if you keep on asking for the rest of this awful day!"

"I only wished to make sure of the hour, and now that we've determined so much—you admit there was a quarrel in which Leonard Westlake took part, I believe?"

Morris flinched again, but that may have been simply because Chief Paulette spoke in a sharper, sterner tone of voice as he abruptly put that question.

"Out with it, you rascal!" cut in Oren Poole, unable to hold himself in restraint. "You're holding something back, and I know it! Out with the whole truth, or you shall share the gallows with the merciless assassin you are trying to screen from justice!"

Instead of flinching or betraying fresh fears at this savage attack, John Morris plucked up courage and with a greater display of nerve than he had shown since that black trouble came upon the house in which he served, he cried out:

"I've kept naught back, sir! I've told all there is to tell, either for or against the young gentleman you're trying your worst to hound to his ruin, sir! Master Leonard left this house before midnight, and after he had gone, I saw the poor master up and about, alive and well as ever I saw him since he came here to—since I first knew him, then!"

Oren Poole seemed somewhat taken aback by this positive declaration, which was anything rather than what he hoped for from those lips, and something of his fierce disappointment showed itself in the sneer with which, his next words came:

"Take care you don't try to prove too much, Morris! How happened it that you were up and prowling about the house when it's a notorious fact that you're an early bird: that you hardly ever hear the clock strike ten o' the night, unless it is in your honest dreams?"

Instead of replying directly to this sneering question, the butler turned toward Chief Paulette, strong emotion showing in his face and causing his voice to tremble as he uttered:

"I can tell it to you better, sir, if I may. He always hated—"

"And not without good reason, as the awful proof up-stairs can bear me witness!" passionately cut in Oren Poole.

Chief Paulette made a sign, and the Insurance Detective answered it by drawing the excited man aside, leaving the butler to say what he would, with only the chief of police to hear or question.

"You wish to tell me—what, Morris?" gravely but kindly asked the official, coming it wisest to calm that strong emotion at least in part. "Speak out, and have no fear, my good man. I know you haven't done anything to either fear for or regret."

"Nor has Master Leonard, sir, and you mustn't let that—let Mr. Poole make you think that way, please!" eagerly said the butler.

"He wanted to know why I was out of bed so much later than usual, sir, and for fear you might reckon I was in mischief—that is—"

"Go on, please."

"I'm trying to do just *that*, your Honor, but I'm all unnerved over this bitter black trouble! And I *knew* it was coming! I felt it in my poor old bones, even before—even before—and *that* was why I couldn't sleep, even after I *did* get to bed, sir! I just *couldn't* sleep!"

"You were uneasy, then? On your master's account, or for young Westlake? Don't be afraid to speak out plainly, my good fellow. The truth never yet injured an innocent man, and you're too upright a fellow to wish to shield one guilty of a horrible crime like this!"

"He never did it, sir! Don't let Mr. Poole make you think *that*!"

"I'd hate to think him guilty, Morris, and if you can help clear him of even suspicion, why hesitate? And so—on whose account were you so uneasy that sleep failed your wooing, last night?"

"On his—on young Master Leonard's, sir! I've known him from his infancy, sir, and I've loved him like—loved him better than I could ever have loved a child of my own, had I been given one!"

"Then you have been long in this service, Morris?"

"For a full quarter of a century, sir! And I loved the young mistress before him—I loved Master Leonard all the dearer for his poor sainted mother's sake, sir!"

"And when there was a quarrel—eh?" gently guiding that rambling tongue in the desired channel.

"Yes, sir. There *was* a quarrel, as there always has been of late years whenever young master and old master came together. But, before the eye of just Heaven, your Honor, the good Lord knows Leonard Westlake had plenty of grounds for quarreling with Hilary Hillyard!"

Although drawn aside by the Insurance Detective, Oren Poole was not so far distant but that he could catch those words passing back and forth, and at this juncture he cut in with a sharp sneer:

"Grounds sufficient to justify him in murdering the husband of that sainted mother, John Morris?"

"He never—he never did *that*, and I *know* it!" passionately cried the old servant, flashing up in defense of his young master. "I wouldn't believe him guilty of such an awful crime if—not if I saw him do it all, with my own two looking eyes—so I wouldn't, then!"

"Didn't you see him do the foul deed, then, John Morris?" sternly demanded Oren Poole, coming forward with a gesture which seemed threatening force.

"I never—he didn't do it, and so I'll hold out to all eternity!" cried the butler, then turning and rushing away, making his escape by way of a side entrance, as no pursuit was made.

Oren Poole looked after the old servant until he vanished from their sight, then turned toward Chief Paulette, speaking coldly, yet with hot ardor lying visible underneath his manner:

"I knew it! I knew it from his shifting eyes, his quivering lips! Right there lies your surest clue, Chief Paulette, and I'd almost take my oath that John Morris can tell just how and when poor father came by his awful death!"

"Do you really think that way, Mr. Poole?"

"I do, and I can't see why you don't think the same! Keep an eye on that old villain, chief! He knows far too much to be let slip through your fingers before he gives it all up on the witness-stand! You will? You'll make sure his evidence is on hand when called for?"

There was an almost feverish eagerness in both words and manner, and none who saw or heard could well doubt the deadly earnestness of him who urged that precaution; still, Chief Paulette showed no intention of meeting him even half-way, since he quietly said:

"Tell all that to Amidor Porson, if you

see fit, Mr. Poole, for this case is wholly in his hands, now, and I have hardly more right to arrest a possible witness, without a warrant, than you have."

Just then a little bustle at the front door betokened a fresh arrival, and recognizing the peculiar voice of Amidor Porson, the coroner for the Nob Hill district, Chief Paulette turned away from Oren Poole, leaving him to enjoy the society of the Insurance Detective as best he might.

Whether Poole recognized that quiet yet masterful man as a professional hunter of criminals, is not so certain, but at any rate he made no overtures which might lead to friendly chat or intimacy, and Prince John was equally willing to remain quiet for the time being.

Since entering that mansion, where all save that one horrible object seemed to evidence wealth and prosperity, the detective had found an abundance of food for thought.

After viewing that corpse with the cloven skull, he could no longer doubt that this was a murder case, instead of suicide or other fraud. No mortal could have dealt himself such a blow, and never a man who ever drew the breath of life could have received such a terrible wound without death following instantaneously.

It could only be a case of assassination, but then came the query: who committed the foul deed? And what for?

Was it merely an adjunct to vulgar robbery, or was it for revenge?

What damaging evidence was the butler, John Morris, holding back? For it was past doubting that he *was* reserving at least a portion of the truth: Prince John never doubted that for an instant.

"Not against *this* step-son, that's certain!" mused the Insurance Detective, with a mental glance at Oren Poole; for he saw that face and figure without turning eyes that way, although the two men now stood almost back to back. "Then—because of Leonard Westlake? It must be so, although I'd far rather take Poole for a murderer than the other!"

Prince John was still trying to win light out of darkness, when Chief Paulette came to the door of the dining-room, making a signal which the Insurance Detective instantly answered in person.

"Ready, sir," he said, as the door closed behind him. "What is it, and which way, please?"

"Nothing more serious than to take a bit of a walk with me, Prince," lightly replied Paulette, turning toward the front entrance, with a passing glance toward the broad flight of stairs, up which a number of men were slowly mounting, led by the fat coroner. "You have no serious objections to the exercise, I trust?"

"Not the least taste in life, sir," with an echoing laugh.

Chief Paulette moved to the door, where Officer Jamison was still on duty as sentinel, letting fall a few low syllables as he passed by.

"All right, your Honor," said the officer, saluting his superior.

Neither man spoke again until they were fairly clear of the grounds belonging to the Hillyard mansion, but then Chief Paulette abruptly said, with a side glance into that handsome face:

"Well, what have you made out of it all, Prince John?"

"Hardly enough to bear telling, chief," was the quiet reply. "One thing seems plain enough, though, from present lights: Hilary Hillyard never took his own life!"

"Not if he died of that cloven skull, Prince."

"Of what else *could* he have perished, chief?"

"I'm not saying *that*, either, pardner. Everything points toward murder, the fatal wound being given with that hatchet. But—dropping that point for the present, do you remember what it was I found caught between door and jamb of that safe, yonder?"

Prince John nodded his remembrance, and Chief Paulette produced the article taken by him from the door of the burglar-proof safe owned in life by Hilary Hillyard, and placed it upon the opened palm of the Insurance Detective.

Although he could have described it all, as faithfully as an artist might have represented the article in oils, Prince John complied, and carefully viewed both button and fragment of cloth attached to it by the silken threads used by the tailor.

"Can you remember seeing any such button, or cloth to match this bit, Prince?" asked the head of police, after a brief silence, during which he seemed making a study of that grave face.

"If you're willing to take a rough guess, chief, I'd say—yes!"

"When and where, please?"

"Less than an hour ago, and back at the Hillyard house. It looks very much like the stuff Leonard Westlake wore, to-day."

"Why wouldn't it, then? Button and cloth both came from the left coat-sleeve of that same young gentleman, Prince John!"

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNWILLING WITNESS.

CHIEF PAULETTE clearly expected an outburst of astonishment at this positive assertion, but the Insurance Detective made neither sound or sign, merely giving that damning bit of evidence a final inspection before handing it back to the finder.

"Well, what now?" asked the chief, curtly, as he stowed the button and bit of torn cloth away in his wallet for safe-keeping. "What have you got to say about it all, Prince?"

There was a faint smile on that strong, handsome face as the answer came:

"What can I say, sir? Seems to me you've pretty well covered all the ground, as it now stands."

Virgo Paulette made an impatient gesture at this.

"You have an opinion, haven't you, man? What do you think of Leonard Westlake now, after what I've said?"

"Looks as though the young fellow was caught in an ugly scrape, for a fact, sir; but, to tell the honest truth, chief, I haven't been thinking nearly so much about Westlake, as I have about your reasons for letting him go foot-free, after such strong proof against him."

Chief Paulette gave a barely perceptible start, and looked a bit more keenly at his present companion. That dim smile was still there, but now it seemed to hold a deeper meaning for those eyes than it had before.

"It isn't quite such news as I thought, then, Prince?"

"About who owned the button, you mean?"

"That, of course. You knew it, before?"

Prince John nodded assent, quietly adding the words:

"You remember I had the young gentleman in charge for some little time, chief? Taking *that* for a button from some coat-sleeve, and seeing that Westlake wore gray—why not?"

"You found where that button had been torn off, that is?"

"I saw where a button and a piece of cloth was lacking, yes. I saw that *you* noticed the same thing, too."

"And then?"

"Well it kept me pretty busy wondering why you let Westlake go free, instead of giving him the collar, chief."

This frank expression of perplexity seemed to smooth down the slightly ruffled feathers of the chief of police, and without stopping to query whether or no the Insurance Detective might not be playing innocent again, Virgo Paulette said, with dry shrewdness:

"If you wanted very much to find a hidden nest, would you start by catching the old bird, Prince?"

"Is *that* the way of it, chief?"

"Something like it, Prince. It would have been a simple matter to arrest the young fellow and face him down with this button, but—would that course have panned out for the best, all around?"

"You evidently thought not, since you permitted him to go free?"

"Because I'm not so certain that Westlake had anything to do with either the killing or with the safe robbery," gravely added Paulette, as the two friends walked briskly on their way.

The Insurance Detective gave a low, half-amused chuckle at this, and then said by way of explanation:

"Let me add the rest, chief. What with the quarrel last evening, the unwilling witness, John Morris, the letter produced by Oren Poole, the button and bit of torn cloth, together with the said to-be-missing cash—take all this in a lump, and it's rather *too much* proof against one man!"

"That's what's the matter, Prince!" exclaimed Paulette, hand going out to grip that of the Insurance Detective. "And I'm all the better satisfied with my action now that it seems you've hit upon the same flaw in the chain."

"Thanks, chief," with another low chuckle. "Still, that's not saying the young fellow is an angel of light, you understand?"

"Not at all, and if he tries to skip the country, he'll simply run himself behind the bars. I'd be worse than a fool to take any wild or unnecessary chances in a case of this importance."

Prince John inhaled a long breath as of relief from some doubt.

"Then he couldn't levitate even if he should feel that way, chief?"

"Well, scarcely," with a grim smile curling his military mustache. "From the moment he left that house, there's never a step of his but what I'll have a full record of, in good time. If he goes quietly about his usual business, well and good: Leonard Westlake will never know how surely he is being shadowed; but in case he attempts to leave town—well, *that* will break the charm, and he'll be arrested so quick 'twill take his breath away!"

"I might have known as much, chief, but with such a number of points to keep separate, I let that one go astray," frankly admitted the Insurance Detective, then glancing at the dial of his watch to add:

"By the way, Paulette, I ought to see Horace Kavanaugh before he takes any positive steps in this affair; but you said?"

"If I didn't say it then, I say it now, Prince. I'd like you to go with me to my office, first. I've made an appointment there, and unless I am widely off my base, you will find fair payment for your trouble."

"Kavanaugh can wait then, chief. I'm with you, of course."

There was little more conversation by the way, and nothing which bore directly upon the Hillyard tragedy with sufficient directness to deserve full record here.

Chief Paulette volunteered no information concerning the identity of the person with whom that appointment had been made, and Prince John made no attempt to gain further light by the way.

There was plenty to occupy their thoughts without talking, however, for even at this early stage, the Hillyard case promised to prove full of complications and tough tangles.

So far nearly everything seemed to point toward Leonard Westlake as the guilty being, and taking matters on the surface alone, enough had been shown to justify his arrest, ten times over.

But—as Prince John put it—wasn't all this entirely too much proof against one man?

If Leonard Westlake had contemplated murder and robbery in order to finally secure what he claimed was justly due him, would he have openly visited his destined victim? Or, if he had gone, would he have given additional grounds for suspicion by loudly quarreling with his step-father, for the servants to bring forth, later?

Then there was the button, torn from his sleeve and held by the jaws of the rifled safe. Could Westlake have lost that, yet never known it? Could that stout cloth have been torn without his knowledge? And if he *had* noticed how his sleeve was caught, would he have been blind enough to go away, leaving such a damning bit of evidence behind him?

It was with such points of interest as those that Prince John occupied his mind during the remainder of that brisk tramp, and so absorbing did he find them that, almost before he could realize the fact, that goodly distance was traversed, and he was following Chief Paulette into his private office, at the Central Station.

As they crossed the threshold, a man in waiting rose hurriedly from a seat, and it was with interest rather than curiosity that

the Insurance Detective recognized John Morris, the butler.

Chief Paulette gave the agitated old servant a cordial welcome, thanking him for being so punctual, doing all he knew how to place him at his ease; but his success was only partial.

Morris was ill at ease, and though he seemed a good bit more composed than when under question at the Hillyard mansion, he certainly could not be considered as a willing caller, here.

Seeing how futile were his efforts along that line, Chief Paulette changed his tactics, and with stern gravity spoke to the butler:

"You know why I have brought you here, John Morris, and you know, too, that I have the power to force a full and accurate statement of facts from your lips, no matter how reluctant you may be to talk clear."

"I can't tell what I don't know, sir," doggedly muttered the butler.

"That's not what we're after, my good fellow. It's what you *do* know, instead, and that is—"

"I've already told you sir, and—Heaven forgive me!—more than I ought, for poor Master Leonard's sake, too!" groaned the old servant, bowing his head and covering his face with joined palms.

Chief Paulette leaned forward far enough to lightly touch that grief-bent form, gravely, almost tenderly saying:

"You're more than foolish not to trust me fully, Morris. If your young master, as you call Westlake, is really innocent of this crime, you can serve him best by telling all you know—all you are trying to hold back."

"There has been enough said and shown already, to fully justify the arrest of Leonard Westlake on suspicion of murdering Hilary Hillyard—"

"He never! I swear he never did that awful deed!" almost fiercely cried the butler, lifting his head and making a passionate gesture of denial. "How *could* he, when—his sainted mother's loving child!"

Chief Paulette caught those eyes, and held them with his own magnetic gaze for a brief space. John Morris began to calm, and then the head of police slowly spoke again:

"Like yourself, Morris, I find it almost impossible to believe that Leonard Westlake could or would commit such a nefarious deed as this surely is; but simple belief, or honest doubt, weighs mighty light in the scales of justice, and unless we can do far better than that, I'm sorely afraid 'twill prove hard lines for your young master."

"He never—he just *couldn't* do such a cruel deed, sir!"

"If that faith is true, Morris, then it is with the truth, the whole truth, that we must shield young Westlake. And so, as I said before: by holding back any information which can possibly throw light upon the events of last night, you are simply aiding those villains who scheme to fasten this black crime upon your young master."

The butler gave a half-stifled groan, shifting uneasily in his seat, but while his dogged determination was plainly shaken, the victory was not entirely won, as yet.

With the patience of a true man-hunter, Virgo Paulette ran over his arguments again, dwelling on such points as the past experience told him promised the best results.

John Morris listened, plainly on the rack, longing yet fearing to make a clean breast of it all as advised.

Prince John said nothing, remaining in the background taking quiet notes. He admired the deadly persistency, the untiring patience with which Virgo Paulette pressed the point he was determined to make; and from his position as looker-on, the Insurance Detective saw that, sooner or later, the chief of police would carry his point.

Changing his tone to suit, Chief Paulette altered his attack, in cold, measured speech painting the inevitable result should the fate of Leonard Westlake depend solely upon such evidence as had already been gathered against him.

"And you pretend to love him, your young master, as you call Westlake? You love him, yet withhold facts which may serve to clear away all this chain of circumstantial evidence which—and his sainted mother is watching you, from on high!"

It was a daring, dramatic stroke, but John Morris was wrought up to the right con-

dition for receiving it, and with a gasping cry, he said:

"I'll tell! God pity me if *that* telling hangs him, though!"

CHAPTER X.

PLAYING A WAITING GAME.

SATISFIED now that his point was good as carried, Chief Paulette cared for that sorely shaken witness, giving him a drink of ice-water, and following it up with a generous dose of pure old brandy from his private decanter.

In the course of a few minutes, thanks to this kindly treatment, the butler was able to give his long delayed evidence, and though he still showed signs of agitation, finding the words difficult to utter, he seemed almost relieved at having the choice taken away from him.

"I told you true, sir, when I swore that Master Westlake left the house just before the clock struck midnight; but—"

"Go on, please."

"He must have come back again, sir, for I saw him—leave the house—early in the morning!"

These words came in gasps, literally forced forth, for agitated as he surely was, John Morris could not help realizing how damaging that assertion must prove to his young master, unless it could be qualified in some manner.

Chief Paulette glanced quickly across at the Insurance Detective, as though bidding him take note. Prince John nodded his comprehension, but said nothing, quietly waiting for more light.

"Early in the morning, you say, Morris?" calmly asked Paulette. "You took note of the time, then?"

"Yes, sir. I couldn't sleep, as I said before. I heard the clock as it struck, and then, only a little while after, some one on the outside of the house called out fire. And then—the rest was found out!"

It seemed like torture, so strongly agitated was the poor old man, but the importance of the case fully justified him in pressing matters hard, and Chief Paulette showed no mercy now.

"Finish with Westlake first, Morris. You can swear that you saw him in or about the house, long after midnight? At what time, please?"

"A little before the clock struck four, sir."

"How did you happen to see him? And just where?"

"I couldn't sleep, as I said before, your Honor; and so—I fancied I heard some one walking in the hall; and so—I went to my window—it looks out on the front grounds—and I saw Master Leonard, walking away from the front, toward the road."

"Outside of the building? Then you never saw him *inside* the house?"

"No, sir. Outside."

"You recognized him, distinctly, of course?"

"Yes, sir. The moon was shining brightly, as you may remember. If I hadn't been dead sure, would I have believed it at all, sir?"

"You saw his face by the light of the moon, then?"

"No, sir; not his face. Just his figure, his way of walking, and the suit he wore."

"Would you recognize that suit, Morris? Could you make oath to it, I mean, if asked?"

"Yes, sir. It was the suit of gray broad cloth which Master Leonard wore this morning when—the one you saw him have on, sir."

"You are positive as to the suit, then, my good man?" mildly persisted the chief of police, but with a veiled glow in his deep-set eyes which told how important he deemed this particular point.

"I can swear to it, your Honor!" declared Morris, with a fervor which found an explanation an instant later. "And *that's* one reason why I'm so dead sure *he* couldn't have done it, sir!"

"Why he couldn't have done what, Morris?"

"Killed the old master, sir! That blow—that horrible gash—and Mr. Hillyard so full of life and full-blooded! Why—can't you see, sir? If Master Leonard *had* done that, wouldn't his clothes show it? And if they had,

been all spattered with blood, wouldn't you have noticed as much?"

With almost pitiable eagerness the faithful old servant urged this new-found plea, plainly showing by that very eagerness how damning he felt all other evidence was against the son of his sainted mistress.

Whether Virgo Paulette attached the same importance to this fact or not, he certainly seemed greatly and most favorably impressed by it, not a little to the joy of the butler.

Letting Morris make the most of this, then, the chief put a few more questions, bearing upon the time, the alarm, the discovery of the burning bed with its ghastly burden, to all of which the witness gave such answers as he might, but none of which brought forth any further light.

The alarm of fire was given by some person outside of the house, no one seemed to know just whom.

The chamber was full of smoke and hot with flames when the door was opened—whether found locked, on the catch, or ajar, Morris was unable to state of his own knowledge, while he had heard all three given as the truth.

The servants, though so terribly shocked and taken so completely by surprise, had worked nobly, getting the fire well under control by the time a squad of firemen came from the nearest station, one bearing a chemical extinguisher on his shoulders, by means of which the fire was completely put out before the first hose cart came upon the scene.

Then—the discovery of the corpse, the notifying the authorities, and—that was all!

When he felt that this witness had been pumped dry, Chief Paulette gravely cautioned him to avoid talking over the tragedy, and to keep a silent tongue in his head until called before the coroner to bear witness to such facts as he might hold in his possession.

"Then, of course, you must tell the whole truth, just as you have given it to me, my good man. I'll be there, to see that you have fair play, so—keep up your courage, and the right shall surely come out on top of the pile, never fear!"

When the door closed behind John Morris and they were left sole occupants of that cozy office, its owner looked half quizzically toward the Insurance Detective, who slowly asked:

"How about Leonard Westlake, now, chief? You mean to place him under arrest, of course?"

"Why of course, Prince?"

"What else can you do, after this latest discovery, sir?"

"Give him free rein, just as I have been doing for the past hour or two. Why not, pray?"

Prince John shrugged his muscular shoulders by way of answer, and his meaning was easily read by those keen eyes. Still, Virgo Paulette contented himself with shrug and smile, then placidly observed:

"Surely you've heard of that pithy old saying, Prince: there's more ways of killing a cat than by choking her with cream?"

"Half-sister to 'bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,'" pertinently quoted the detective.

Chief Paulette laughed softly, with more of amusement than of impatience or annoyance as his face bore witness.

"You're good at capping quotations, Prince, and so had ought to read mild riddles like this one of mine without serious difficulty. I'll put it into plainer shape, then, for your benefit.

"You heard what Morris swore, about that gray suit? You saw what I found caught in the jaws of Hillyard's safe? And you haven't forgotten how you satisfied yourself where that same button came from?"

"Twice, yes, followed by a negative, your Honor," lightly answered the Insurance Detective, as the other paused, inquiringly.

"Good enough, and here comes the kernel: if Leonard Westlake is actually the guilty one—if he killed Hilary Hillyard and robbed that safe last night—then he will not be much longer in discovering his torn sleeve and lost button, when he will surely recall just how that loss must have occurred. Don't you reckon, Prince?"

"It looks plausible, chief."

"Thanks!" with a touch of sarcasm in his tones, to answer that low, almost indifferent response. "Well, then, what would naturally follow?"

"He would destroy the coat, and so brush away all proof against himself in that quarter," came the ready response.

"Not quite *all* proof, my dear fellow," amended Paulette, with one of his dry, chuckling laughs. "If Leonard Westlake really murdered Hilary Hillyard and robbed that safe, I hope he will follow precisely the course you mark out: and because of that hope I've let him go free as air, to all seeming."

"In hopes that he confirm your suspicions by destroying his coat?"

"Precisely, yes! Say he does *that*: I still hold this button and the few threads of gray broadcloth attached. You saw when and where I discovered that button, and can swear to as much, as a matter of course?"

"Certainly, but—"

"Wait a bit, please. I saw that button and cloth were similar to those worn by Westlake, and while we were in that room together, I took pains to match both: I saw that button and bit of cloth came from the left cuff of the coat worn by Westlake."

"I can make oath to that effect, if the occasion arises, and I believe that you can do pretty much the same thing, Prince John?"

"I can swear to my belief that they once formed part of the same coat sleeve, chief, but—to hark back again: you mean—?"

"First, to give Leonard Westlake slack enough to hang himself with, in case he really merits the rope," promptly answered Paulette, giving a brief show of his teeth. "Of course it will come to an arrest, and that without much further delay, since the coroner can hardly overlook so much and such strong proof against the poor devil."

"Then you are not so mighty sure Westlake deserves the collar for this ugly bit of work, chief?" shrewdly asked Prince John, catching at that involuntary clue.

"What makes you think that, Prince? Do you believe him guilty?"

"I've seen many an arrest where the proof was a heap sight less," evasively answered the Insurance Detective. "And you?"

"I'll keep along as I've begun, and let the case work itself out if luck goes that way. Of course, when the coroner says so—and he can't well help finding cause for recommending the arrest and holding Leonard Westlake for the killing—I'll run the gentleman in."

Prince John slowly nodded his head after a thoughtful fashion of his own, and for a moment neither men spoke. But presently the Insurance Detective broke that silence, with the words:

"Well, here's hoping all will run along in keeping with your wishes, Paulette, although I can't help thinking that Westlake—if really the guilty man—will try to improve his freedom by extending it far beyond the city limits!"

"If he tries that on, 'twill only be to fetch up in prison, Prince," easily assured the official, with an amused smile. "I don't mind owing to you, here alone, that I very much doubt his being the right man; but, at the same time, I couldn't afford to run any unnecessary risks, and so put my good lads to work, under cover."

"Then Westlake is shadowed?"

"At every step—yes!"

"Then I reckon it's all right, so far as you're concerned, chief."

"I have no fears on that score, but *you*, Prince?"

The detective made a swift gesture, then exclaimed:

"Oh, count me out of the case, my dear fellow! My sole interest in the matter hangs on the insurance policies, and those—well, of course they must wait until their turn comes 'round!"

CHAPTER XI.

WANTED: FACTS TO FIT A FANCY.

PRINCE JOHN uttered these words with an earnestness which a friend could hardly doubt, at the same time rising to his feet like one who had other claims upon his time.

Chief Paulette seemed about to speak, but altered his mind before the initial sound

escaped his lips, contenting himself with a curt nod which the Insurance Detective might interpret to suit himself.

Prince paused with hand on knob, to say: "Of course my lips are under seal, chief, until you bid me talk, so far as your discoveries are concerned; but I'll have to chatter a little to content Kavanaugh. Hillyard was one of his risks, and he'll be half wild until he knows the whole story."

"I'm not afraid to trust to your good sense, Prince. Tell him what you see fit, just so this button is not brought forward."

"That's what I meant, of course," with a bright smile, as he turned the knob and opened the door. "Of course I'll be on deck when wanted."

"That's likely to be soon, too. Porson's a mighty spry official, if he is a burden unto himself. Will you come by this way, or shall we meet at Hillyard's?"

"Out yonder, I reckon," after a brief space given to thought, like one calculating both time and duties. "Well, until then, chief."

"Until then: all right, Prince."

That bright smile lasted until John Prince passed through the Central, where each officer who saw him had a respectful recognition to offer the professional from the other side of the Great Divide, who had won for himself no little distinction since his coming to San Francisco.

It lasted until he was out on the pave, under the genial sun, walking leisurely along, like a man who is wholly devoid of all care; but then came a change, and the smile gave place to a look of gravity which was little short of gloom.

His thoughts were wholly occupied with this tragedy, and its possible outcome! Even this soon he had grown so deeply interested in the case that he had forgotten his purpose of leaving for the East that same forenoon.

He had hastily disclaimed any intention of "mixing in" with the affair, beyond its insurance features, yet just now he was thinking of far more than the money value involved, and one particular fact which had as yet escaped open mention by any one, at least within his hearing, was what gave his face that serious, even troubled look.

Despite his evident preoccupation, John Prince took the shortest route to the huge office-building in which was the room he had jointly occupied with Horace Kavanaugh when word was first sent them of that Nob Hill tragedy; and when he rapped at that office door, his face wore its usual expression of quiet good-humor.

A voice bade him enter, and crossing the threshold, Prince found the solicitor in company with a tall, portly, pleasant-looking man of something past middle age, whom he at once recognized as the examining physician whom Kavanaugh had alluded to as having passed on Hilary Hillyard's application for insurance.

"Good!" ejaculated Kavanaugh, springing to his feet in excited greeting as he recognized the detective. "I began to think you'd never show up again, and— Doctor, this is the gentleman— Prince, this is Doctor Morgantrude, our examining physician."

There followed a mutual bow, a hand-grip, a few conventional words, then the trio took seats, and Kavanaugh blurted forth:

"Spit it out, man, dear! Tell us the whole racket and I'll try to forgive you for giving me the dirty shake out yonder! Who—how could you do it, man, dear? And me dying to learn—ah, ye devil, ye!"

That playfulness was clearly forced, to cover his real anxiety, and remembering how the solicitor had, just before receiving that telephonic message, been priding himself on securing such a good "risk" for so large an amount, John Prince took compassion upon him, as far as he dared under existing circumstances.

He briefly but clearly detailed the facts of that affair, as they showed on the surface, patiently bearing with the numerous questions which Kavanaugh put, aided now and then by the less disturbed doctor.

As a matter of course he said nothing about the latest evidence extracted from the butler, nor did he even allude to the significant evidence which Chief Paulette had found caught in the safe door.

Having told all he intended, then, Prince

John adroitly shifted positions, turning inquisitor himself.

"I understand you passed on this particular risk, doctor?"

"I did, yes, sir," was the prompt reply. "And I never signed a favorable report with greater pleasure or with more perfect faith!"

"You considered Hilary Hillyard a good risk, then?"

"One of the very best, sir. His physical condition was absolutely perfect, and his family record was superb. I felt that Kavanaugh had fairly won a medal from the company, by securing such a client."

"And now—holy Moses!" fairly groaned the solicitor.

Prince John frowned thoughtfully for a brief space, then asked:

"Can you see any possible ground for delaying or refusing payment on the score of fraud, doctor?"

"Not the ghost of a chance, sir," positively answered Morgantrude. "The amount written was so large, that I took particular pains to assure myself on every point before signing the report. Of course we can allege fraudulent representations, but to make it hold—never!"

"He would not be a difficult man to identify, either?"

"One of the very easiest, rather."

"You could swear to him, of course?"

"I could pick him out of ten thousand, sir!"

"Even though the flames had been at work upon the body?"

"Even then, unless the damage was far worse than you have given us to understand," asserted Morgantrude with almost grim positivity. "There are very few men in the world with just such a build as Hilary Hillyard, and if the flames had left little more than his skeleton, I could identify the remains with comparative little difficulty."

Through all this Horace Kavanaugh had listened with interest, nervously squirming in his chair; but now, as though catching a clue, he hastily asked:

"Is there any doubt as to its being Hilary, Prince?"

"Not to my knowledge," came the grave reply. "On the contrary, all who saw the remains while I was by, seemed to recognize Hilary."

"Then what are you trying to get at, any way, man, dear?"

"Have you a copy of this latest policy, Kavanaugh?" asked Prince, ignoring that querulous outburst.

"No, but Doc—your private record, Morgantrude?"

Even as the solicitor spoke, the physician was producing a fair-sized note-book which he carried in an inside pocket, and deftly running over a number of thin leaves, placed the open book in front of the Insurance Detective.

With an interest which he took little trouble to disguise, John Prince scanned the record thus exposed, while Kavanaugh altered his position in order to make a similar examination from over a shoulder.

The detective frowned as he read, yet he who could have found serious fault with such a carefully written description as this, must have been super-critical.

In addition to the customary items of height, weight, waist and chest measurements, and the like, the examiner had put down two or three minor scars, just such as nearly every man can show, relics of boyhood scrapes and accidents.

"They might help in an ordinary case," said Prince, tapping the page where those items were recorded, "but hardly of service here. Then there was no deformity, doctor?"

"Not the slightest, sir."

"Nor broken bones, I see?"

"Nor that, either. Hillyard himself joked over the fact, congratulating himself on having never thrown away good dollars in carrying an accident policy."

"Rather unfortunate for us that he changed his mind far enough to take out such heavy life insurance, isn't it?"

"Unfortunate, but true!" grimly smiled the doctor.

Kavanaugh gave another hollow groan at this, muttering:

"And only a bit ago—just before Van Scotten sent that message over the wire—divil blow slack line up his trowser-legs! Only then, faith, here I was, congratulating myself on the fact that the second premium was coming due! And now—oh, the bad luck of it, sure!"

Prince John paid no attention to this plaint, but again studied that private record, like one who was trying his level best to fit facts to a fancy formed to suit his own wishes.

If his face was a fair criterion to go by, his success was anything but brilliant.

"No deformity, no broken bones! Then—any false teeth, doctor?"

"No, sir. As I told you before, Hillyard was simply perfect, so far as his physical condition went. That is so unusual—carried to such an extent, I mean—that I made my report more full than customary, as you can judge for yourself, Mr. Prince."

"I have been admiring your methods, doctor," with a brief but polite bow; then adding: "So you will have only the frame and shape to go by when you are called on to identify the remains, Morgantrude?"

"Nothing more, since the fire has in all probability obliterated those body scars. Still, I imagine that will prove sufficient for all purposes. Hilary Hillyard was not one easily mistaken in life, and he will be just as readily identified in death."

The physician spoke with perfect confidence, disagreeable though he knew such words must prove to the others; but John Prince shook his head with a real or admirably counterfeited frown of disgust.

"There ought to be a special clause inserted in every policy, that all insurance was null and void unless the insured had some distinctive mark to make identification easy. Say a crooked leg, a withered arm, or a missing finger!"

Dr. Morgantrude gave a short laugh, like one who fully appreciated such a grim jest, then said:

"That would simplify matters, sure enough, only—"

"Only Hilary Hillyard had nothing of the sort, of course?" cut in the Insurance Detective, as he closed the notebook.

"No physical defect of any description, no, sir," again declared the examiner, with a touch of growing irritation as he added: "Pray what am I to understand, Mr. Prince, by your repeated queries on that point? You surely cannot mean that—"

The detective leaned back in his chair, giving a careless wave of his hand as he made answer before that query was complete:

"What I might have meant had your answers come in different shape, dear doctor, hardly cuts any figure now. So—say I was simply talking to hear my own melodious voice, and let it go at that!"

"But—you meant something, sir!"

"Well, then, since you really seem to wish it, I'll make a clean bosom of it all, doctor. I was simply trying to find facts to fit a fancy of my own invention."

Kavanaugh sprang to his feet in excitement at this, exclaiming:

"You've made some sort of discovery, Prince? What is it, man?"

"If no savvy, how can say?" laughed the detective, rising to leave.

CHAPTER XII.

THE INQUEST AND THE VERDICT.

WITHOUT waiting for an answer to his quotation, the Insurance Special left the agent's office, and hurried away on his own business for the time being.

He had made all arrangements for leaving San Francisco for good, as already stated, but his determination had changed since learning of the Hillyard tragedy.

It took some little time to make necessary changes, but Prince John had everything in good trim before the noon hour, when he was more than ready to entertain and thoroughly appreciate a hearty meal.

He was still at table, when a message reached him, from Chief Paulette, stating that Coroner Porson had determined to hold the first session of the inquest that same afternoon.

As soon as his meal was over, the detective hastened across to the Central, where he found the chief, as anticipated.

In a few words Prince told how powerfully both Horace Kavanaugh and Wesley Morgantrude were interested in the case, and begged that permission might be given for their attendance at the inquest.

"Of course the doctor would have to be called as witness, if only to help in identifying the body; but I want something more than that for them both, chief," added Prince, earnestly. "I want them to be in attendance from start to finish, not merely as witnesses. For the interest of the companies, chief."

"They have a great deal at stake, I believe?"

"Only half a million insurance on his life—no more!"

There was grim earnestness lying back of that light, even airy sentence, which Chief Paulette readily interpreted aright; and he gave the detective the assurance he desired.

Thus it came to pass that, before the inquest was fairly opened, Prince John was able to introduce both Kavanaugh and Morgantrude into the fire-marred chamber where that grim relic was still lying, for the purpose of viewing the corpse, as possible witnesses of importance.

Chief Paulette and Coroner Porson bore them company on this tour of inspection, and the trio stood by in silence while those remains were carefully inspected.

Neither man offered any suggestion, nor made any remark which could guide or hasten the decision to be formed; but none such were needed, as it turned out.

Dr. Morgantrude was first to express himself satisfied, drawing back from that hideous remnant of poor mortality, and even Horace Kavanaugh could not find aught on which to hang a last hope.

Beyond a doubt this was all that remained on earth of Hilary Hillyard, whose passing from life was to cost the insurance companies a cool half million of dollars!

After this inspection was over—a somewhat irregular proceeding at that stage of the case, but granted as a favor to those most nearly concerned—Coroner Porson called his little court to order, in the spacious dining-room, under that same roof-tree.

While these preliminaries were taking shape, the corpse was being cared for, taken from the ruins of his bed, borne to an adjoining chamber and placed in position on a cooling-board in readiness for the casket when that should arrive.

Prince John seemed to feel an almost morbid interest in the case, and hovered near enough to view all these arrangements, finally turning away from that chamber only when word was passed along from lip to lip that the court had been called to order by the coroner.

Entering the room, Prince John quietly took up a station where he could both hear and see everything that passed, while at the same time he called no particular notice his own way.

Coroner Porson made a brief, sensible speech on opening his court of investigation, explaining its scope and its powers, admitting that no man could be compelled to bear witness against his will, but reminding all that there were other means which could and would be taken in case any witness should palpably attempt to obstruct or mislead justice as there represented.

He likewise reminded all that whatever was offered as evidence before this jury, would go on record, and doubtless be made use of in a higher court, granting that this sad affair should prove to be, what it now seemed, a case for the grand jury.

All this was a mere matter of form, yet it produced something of the desired effect on such of the servants as heard that grave address.

All those belonging to the house, save Oren Poole, having been sent out of the room to await their turn, Coroner Porson called Wesley Morgantrude, M. D., to the stand as the first witness.

The doctor was accustomed to playing such a part, and tersely but clearly told how he became connected with the case; then went on to declare his belief that the subject of inquest was the gentleman known in life as Hilary Hillyard.

"You have viewed the corpse, I believe, witness?" asked the coroner.

"I have, your Honor."

"And you identified the remains, you say?"

"As those of Hilary Hillyard, yes, your Honor."

"You speak with unusual positiveness, doctor, but of course you do so only on the soundest basis. Will you kindly explain to the gentlemen of this jury, how and why you are so positive in this identification?"

Dr. Morgantrude was fully capable of doing this, and with words which left no room for doubting either his belief or his honesty, he told how he had good reasons for recognizing the deceased.

In response to several questions propounded by members of the jury, he described the peculiarities of Hilary Hillyard's frame, ending by declaring his ability to identify the subject among a thousand other bodies, all as badly mutilated.

When this point had been sufficiently dwelt upon to satisfy all, the witness, as a surgeon, was called upon to give a professional opinion as to the manner in which the deceased came to his death.

"Through a heavy blow or stroke of hatchet or ax, which blow cleft his skull," promptly replied the witness, then adding a technical description of the injury, but which need not find record here.

After Dr. Morgantrude was permitted to leave the stand, other witnesses were summoned in turn, and inquiry made as to the alarm of fire, the discovery of the corpse, and other important facts.

None of the servants could say just who gave the first alarm of fire, but John Morris, the butler, unhesitatingly declared that the alarm came from some one on the outside of the building.

There were no means of ascertaining who this mysterious unknown could have been, when the coroner called for the party to volunteer his evidence, in vain. And after some little delay, trying to learn who had sent in the first notice of fire to the nearest station, that particular point was passed over for the time being.

Then came the crucial test, so far as John Morris was concerned.

The coroner had learned sufficient of the real facts to know how his questions ought to be shaped in order to force even an unwilling witness to tell all he knew; and though Chief Paulette took occasion to remind Morris of his promise, and that his loved young master stood in worse peril through unwilling witnesses than from willing enemies, it was a sore trial for the poor old man.

The truth came so reluctantly from his lips, and he seemed so fully conscious of the damaging nature of his evidence, that his words were listened to with far more than ordinary interest, and given full weight by the jury.

Only in a little more connected shape, Morris bore witness pretty much as he had already confessed to Chief Paulette, telling how Leonard Westlake had called at the house that evening, to demand the money which had for so long been unjustly withheld from his hands.

He lowered his voice a little as he told of the hot, angry words which passed between the two men, after that demand, hurrying on to tell how Westlake left the house, just before the hall clock struck the midnight hour.

At this, the butler made a move as though about to withdraw from stand and room, but Coroner Porson gravely checked him, and demanded the rest of his evidence.

Seeing no way of evasion or of escape, and noting the grave nod given him by Chief Paulette, Morris told the rest, being permitted to quit the stand only when he had positively sworn to recognizing Leonard Westlake in that gray shape which he saw stealing away from the front of the building, only a few minutes before the alarm of fire was given.

This testimony, as all could see, bore heavily against Leonard, but even worse remained, to be brought forth by Oren Poole as that gentleman took the stand and demanded the oath.

No need to repeat his evidence. It did not vary an iota from the tale he told Chief Paulette, and when the letter signed by Hilary Hillyard was put in evidence, both coroner and jury looked grave and ominous.

By his own desire, Oren Poole had been called latest, and when his evidence was all in, from start to finish bearing with deadly force against the younger step-son of the murdered man, he stood aside with a grim, vengeful smile on his face, a fiery glow in his blue eyes.

Prince John had listened to all this without saying aught, almost without motion; but now, as Coroner Porson rose from his seat, leaning both fat hands upon the table which served him as desk, gravely viewing the jury before delivering his charge, the Insurance Detective took advantage of that almost breathless interest to slip noiselessly from the room, pausing just without the door for a brief space, bending head in listening, like one who fears being followed by some person.

As none such came, and when he caught the sounds of the coroner's voice beginning that solemn charge, Prince John swiftly passed up the broad flight of stairs, pausing on the landing above merely long enough to make certain no one was either following or watching him, then hastening along to the chamber in which the corpse of the man whose fate was under inquest below stairs just then, had been deposited for the present.

Closing the door behind himself, Prince John bent over that fire-bitten relic for a few seconds—there was a sharp *click*!—and then the Insurance Detective, unusually pale, but with a grim smile marking his handsome visage, retraced his steps, leaving everything in that chamber of death looking just as it had before his entrance.

The coroner had finished his charge, and the jury were retiring to an adjacent apartment for the purpose of shaping their verdict, when the detective returned to his former station.

To all seeming, his brief absence had passed unnoticed, and settling down as before, Prince John waited for the verdict, in common with all the others there assembled.

They were not held long in suspense, but this did not surprise any who had closely followed the testimony given.

Filing into the room, led by their chosen foreman, the jury was received in due form by the coroner, and put to question.

Yes, they had agreed upon a verdict, and as it had been put into writing, the foreman handed the paper to the coroner, begging him to read the contents, aloud if he saw fit and proper.

The verdict was that Hilary Hillyard came to his death by a blow from a hatchet or short ax, dealt by hands as yet unknown to the jury.

"And we recommend that Leonard Westlake be arrested and held for further investigation, as the probable criminal!"

CHAPTER XIII.

DEFENDED BY A WOMAN.

As yet unaware of the verdict found by the coroner's jury, which cast such a damaging reflection upon his honor, Leonard Westlake was slowly walking through the gray of evening, head bowed, hands clasped tightly behind his back, brain busy with thought.

Naturally enough he had been running over in mind the events of the past few hours; a curious blending of shame and pride, of grief and joy, of fierce hatred and passionate love.

But oftener than any other, one memory came to him that in which Ethelyn Garland figured, where she so fully proved the depth and entirety of her love for him.

"And now, just when all looks so black and shameful! Now, when any heart less true and pure would shrink away from me in doubt and fear! If—if I only might!"

His breath came hot and strong, just then, for the temptation was even more powerful to him now than it had been when offered on the red lips of the woman whom he fairly idolized.

If he only might! If they were only there together, on the deck of that swift and stanch yacht! Together, for weal or for woe, for the remainder of life, whether that was to set in peaceful old age, or—at the foot of a gallows!

A cold chill crept over his frame as that

ill-boding thought came back to him with dread persistency, and making a fierce gesture, Leonard Westlake quickened his pace as though he would fairly run away from the haunting terror.

After parting from Ethelyn Garland that afternoon, the young man had remained in seclusion, talking to no person, giving none a chance to talk to him, making no effort to learn how matters might be shaping themselves at the Hillyard mansion.

He had seen and heard enough to know that trouble of a serious sort lay just ahead, for him; and while that tragedy had in a measure stunned the step-son, still he was shrewd enough to realize that it would be worse than folly for him to attempt flight, or try to go into hiding from the police.

He fully anticipated arrest, and spent the larger portion of that day in waiting for the coming of these deputized for that purpose; but the sun set and twilight began to fall over the City of the Golden Gate without the expected coming to pass.

Remaining so closely secluded, then, Leonard Westlake heard no echoes from the inquest, and when he finally sallied forth, resolved on securing a possible final interview with the woman of his love, he knew not how blackly his name had been branded by that jury.

There was proof that his coming was expected, in the fair face and queenly figure of Ethelyn Garland outlined at one of the lace-shaded windows; and that vision brought a smile to those stern lips, calling back something of the brightness which had always formed the chief charm to that manly countenance.

There was no longer thought of etiquette, now, and Ethelyn herself gave admittance to the ardent lover, before his summons could be made at the door.

But it seemed that other eyes were on the alert for the coming of Leonard Westlake, for the lovers had hardly time granted them for a fair greeting, there behind closed doors, when a warning knock came, and the heavy barrier swung open before the hand of a tall, comely, yet now pale and grave-faced old gentleman.

Leonard Westlake flushed warmly as he turned at the sound and recognized the intruder, and his arms dropped away from that yielding form.

"Mr. Garland!"

"Father!"

Thurlow Garland made a gesture of refusal as Westlake mechanically moved a hand as though in greeting, speaking sternly:

"Is this fair? Is it honorable, Mr. Westlake?"

The lover shrunk a bit, as one might flinch from a painful blow; but as Ethelyn gave a low cry of mingled pain and indignation, Westlake rallied swiftly, looking more his usual self as he made reply:

"I have done nothing to blush for, Mr. Garland, or I could hardly meet you as I now do, face to face, eye to eye."

"There is nothing charged against you, then?"

"Nothing true—nothing but the basest of all calumnies, father!" cried Ethelyn, her rich color coming back, her eyes aglow, her every look showing how implicitly she held faith in this, her lover.

She would have testified that perfect trust, by actions as well, only Westlake gently but firmly resisted, putting away the fair arms which moved toward his shoulders, himself very pale as he still confronted the stern parent.

"You have heard, then, sir?"

"I have heard that you are more than suspected of killing your step-father, Hilary Hillyard—yes!"

"That charge is false, sir, and if it is ever openly brought against me, I will so prove it before God and mankind," earnestly declared the lover; then quickly adding: "It is because of that vile insinuation, sir, that you see me here, and now."

"Will you explain yourself, Mr. Westlake?"

"I ask that very permission as a favor, Mr. Garland, for I came here this evening, hoping to see you, that I might say these words: I love Ethelyn, your daughter!"

Garland frowned afresh, but said nothing just then. Westlake was holding up an ap-

pealing hand, and the father was generous enough to give him the chance he desired.

"I am proud of that love, too, Mr. Garland, but I am a thousand-fold prouder of the glad fact that your daughter not only endures that love, but returns it in kind."

"It's Heaven's own truth, father," bravely spoke up the maiden. "We do love each other, with all our souls!"

"Against my wishes, remember," coldly spoke the millionaire.

"That is true, unfortunately for me, sir," gravely admitted Westlake, yet holding his ground firmly.

"I never looked upon this intimacy with approval, but if I could for even a moment have anticipated what has come to pass—if I had dreamed that this day you would stand before me as one marked with the brand of Cain—"

"Father! How can you say such cruel, such unjust words?"

"There are hundreds of men who are using even harsher terms this very hour," gravely persisted the magnate. "All the town is filled with such talk; all the town is saying that Hilary Hillyard came to his death by your hands, Leonard Westlake!"

"They lie! It is not—tell him it is not so, Leonard!"

"Would you believe my words, Mr. Garland, if I gave you that assurance?" slowly asked the younger man.

"Can you give me that assurance, Westlake?"

"Shall I make oath to my perfect innocence of this foul deed, sir?"

The millionaire frowned afresh. Right or wrong, it seemed to him just then that Leonard Westlake was evading the point, like one who hoped to escape flatly perjuring himself.

The accused saw this, and was at no loss how to interpret that dark expression. A faint smile came into his own face, then fled, leaving him grave and sober, yet with eyes which steadily and bravely met that keen gaze.

"Mr. Garland, it cuts me to the heart to think that my mother's son could even be suspected of such a foul crime; but since there is such a suspicion afloat, I owe it to the memory of that mother—now in heaven, if there be such a place—to yourself, your daughter, and my love for Ethelyn, to give solemn assurance that I am not guilty."

"I call high Heaven to hear me when I swear that I am wholly innocent of part or lot in the death of Hilary Hillyard. More: may I stand accursed of men, and loathed by woman—may the one I love with every fiber of my being, every drop of my blood, every throb of my heart, turn from me with scorn and loathing, if there be even the shadow of sin in my heart, or stain upon my hand!"

It is easy enough to place the bare words on record, but they alone are like the shadow which the sun casts of a beautiful tree; the semblance is there, the outlines are correct, but—the life is lacking!

Taken by themselves, those sentences read flatly, or exaggerated, according to the temperament of the one passing judgment; but coming from his lips, warm, earnest, sparkling with vitality and instinct with truth: that was a far different thing!

ThurLOW Garland was plainly impressed, yet his face remained grave and troubled, while he spoke with tones only slightly softened:

"That sounds something more like it, Mr. Westlake, yet I still consider you greatly in the wrong, and think you would be showing more manhood as well as honesty in keeping aloof from my daughter while this ugly cloud hangs over your head."

"Of course there can be no question of an engagement between my daughter and yourself, so long as this trouble lasts, and if you are really the man you claim to be, you'll wait until fairly cleared before all the world; and while waiting, keep away from Ethelyn!"

While ThurLOW Garland was speaking thus, the maiden stood waiting, listening, her lovely face the battleground of powerful emotions, but with hope shining through all the rest.

She could have wished for words more favorable to her lover, perhaps, yet she hardly hoped for better, up to that ending.

Then she gave a low cry, shrinking at first as if a cruel blow had fallen upon her own person, then rallying to the defense of the one thus proscribed.

"You are cruel, unjust, father!" she said, huskily, at first, but with steadying tones as she went on in defense of her lover. "You have no right to condemn him in advance! It is not fair or generous for you to banish him from his warmest, truest, perhaps his only remaining friends!"

"I love him—I will never love another man, though my years run past the century mark! And I'm proud of that love! Look!"

Ethelyn flung her arms about Westlake's neck, pressing her lips to his with passionate fervor, then gazed at her parent with proud eyes as she rapidly continued her defense of her lover:

"As soon as I caught the foul lying rumors that fill the air, father, I hastened to find this, my lover, my king, my all!"

"Child—Ethelyn!"

"Wait, father! I sought for him, and finding, I took him with me to the beach, where the yacht was lying under half-steam. I pointed that out to Leonard. I told him the captain had received word to have all in readiness for speedy flight."

"What? Yet you say—"

Ethelyn's hand touched those lips, and her own continued:

"I bade my lover flee, not because he was guilty, but that he might be sure of retaining his liberty until he could collect full proofs of his innocence, and so eternally confound his enemies. But he—did he lack for honor or consideration, then, father? Listen, and you shall be sole judge as to that!"

Now it was Westlake who would have checked that flood of love-warm speech, but Ethelyn would have her will for once, and evading him, as she foiled her father, cried out in fairly exultant tones:

"Instead of taking to flight, he refused to leave me. And when—for just then I had no false shame, my father! And when I said that I would bear him company in his flight, rather—"

ThurLOW Garland gave a sharp exclamation at this, turning ghastly pale and swaying unsteadily on his feet, so great was the surprise.

"Ethelyn! You never—you could, not even think of such a thing!"

"She was half beside herself, sir," gently spoke up Westlake, but with face bright and eyes loving. "Of course I couldn't have taken advantage of such wondrous generosity, even if my life had depended on it."

"Listen to me, father," cried Ethelyn, in turn, her little palm again resting over those manly lips. "I've told you truth, without reserve. I may have been beside myself, perhaps, though that I deny. I made the offer, and I would have fled with him, my lover, my king! But—he refused to even talk of such a course!"

"As any honest man would, of course."

"If knowing himself guilty, wouldn't he have taken advantage of my offer—at least of the yacht, father? If less than the most honest, the most honorable man living to-day, would he have stood firm against temptation when I flung—"

"Ethelyn!"

There was far more of pain than of anger in that cry, and the daughter acknowledged it by leaving that sentence unfinished.

But her defense was not yet completed, for she added:

"What answer did my king make, father, when I tempted him? That he would far rather die as a man, than live on as a cur!"

Proudly the maiden pronounced these words, as though in them she found full justification of her faith; but before anything further could be said, there came a sharp ring at the front door.

CHAPTER XIV.

"IN THE NAME OF THE LAW."

LEONARD WESTLAKE turned quickly in that direction, that proud, happy flush fading away from his face; for he felt a premonition of the truth, and knew as by instinct that the hounds of justice were hot upon his scent.

He said nothing, and beyond losing that

warm color, betrayed no uneasiness, outwardly calm and composed while waiting for that imperious summons to be answered.

Both father and daughter, it seemed, had a vague fear of what was impending; for neither spoke, neither moved further than to look toward the door, beyond which had sounded that alarm.

Thus for a few moments, then Leonard Westlake rallied, gently freeing himself from those loving arms whose warm pressure was so dear and comforting to him in this, his hour of sore trouble. And looking into the grave face of the millionaire, he gently uttered:

"I'm afraid I've lingered here too long, Mr. Garland, but—pray try to forgive me this, as well! Now—good-by—farewell, both!"

Just then there came sounds of a deep-toned voice, asking for Leonard Westlake, and knowing that the worst was upon him now, the young man turned quickly away from his love, opening the door and stepping into the lamp-lit hall, closely followed by the millionaire.

Westlake saw two or more men standing at the threshold, beyond the servant who had opened the door in answer to that summons; and though he failed to recognize either of the two faces upon which the hall-light fell, he could not mistake their calling, nor their present mission.

As he stepped from the parlor into the hall, Westlake was instantly recognized by one of those callers, for he gave a sharp exclamation, pushing the servant aside and striding forward, saying:

"It's you, Westlake? Sorry, sir, but the fact is—"

"I understand, sir, and am ready to go with you," coldly cut in the young man, thinking only of sparing Ethelyn as much as might be.

But ThurLOW Garland was made of slightly different stuff, and his sinewy, still powerful hand fell upon a shoulder; drawing Westlake back, while he at the same time spoke out:

"Wait a bit, all of you. What does this mean, anyway, gentlemen? Who are you, and what is your business here?"

The taller of the two men, clearly impressed by that haughty tone, or else recalling what was owing a gentleman who could draw his check (and have it honored) for seven figures, doffed his hat with one hand, while with the other he parted the front of his coat far enough to reveal a bright metal badge which declared him a detective in the employ of a well-known Protective Agency.

"Begging your pardon, sir, for intruding like this: but when business drives, one has to go ahead—ahem!"

"You are an officer of the law, then?"

"Yes, sir. Name Cartwright, position detective," curtly answered the fellow, clearly stung a bit by that coldly imperious tone.

He waved a hand toward his companion, then added:

"This gent is Thomas Mellen, constable. He has a warrant to serve, and I was detailed from Headquarters to help him out, in case of trouble. Which, of course," with a slight bow toward Westlake, "is nothing more than a bare matter of form, since a gent so high-toned as Mr. Westlake, would never stoop so low as to cut up rusty—so to speak!"

Detective Cartwright apparently liked to hear himself speak, for he rattled on briskly enough.

Leonard Westlake might have cut him short, but a faint sound at the door of the parlor had drawn his eye thither, and the lover was now bidding Ethelyn a silent farewell as she stood there, pale and agitated, yet with love and trust glowing in her jetty eyes.

And ThurLOW Garland seemed debating with himself what manner of reception he had ought to bestow upon these intruders.

The constable, however, hearing his mission so fluently stated, apparently deemed it the cue for action, and stepping abreast his aid, produced a folded document from an inner pocket, bluntly speaking:

"Sorry, gents, but business is business. I've got to take you, Leonard Westlake, in the name of the law!"

"As I said before, I'm willing to go with you, sir," coldly uttered the accused; but as before, he was checked by the millionaire.

"Not too fast, please, Westlake! And you, sir: you say you've got a warrant?"

"Right here, sir," with a wave of the paper. "Made out in regular form, from first to last, sir, if I do say it my own self!"

"Let me look at it, will you?"

The constable hesitated for a moment, looking toward the detective like one in doubt as to whether or no he ought to comply.

"It's all right, Mellen," declared Cartwright. "We're going according to Gunter, and as for the gent—I'll go his bail, too!"

Thus reassured, Constable Mellen handed the document to Thurlow Garland, who opened the folds, glancing rapidly over the printed form, taking note only of the pen-inserted words.

It was nothing more than he had expected from the first words, being a warrant in due form commanding the arrest and holding of one Leonard Westlake, on suspicion of being principal or accessory to the death of one Hilary Hillyard, regularly sworn to before and issued by a justice of the peace.

But when those keen eyes came to the name of the person swearing out the warrant, the millionaire could not entirely smother a sharp ejaculation.

"Oren Poole! He was sworn—"

Leonard Westlake moved far enough to also scan that page, and as he caught sight of that name an instant later, a short, bitter laugh parted his lips, followed by the words:

"Issued on the sworn belief of Oren Poole, eh? All right! So much the better!"

"Your step-brother, Westlake!"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Garland, but, thank fortune, Oren Poole is no relative of mine, either by blood or through marriage."

"Yet—I could wish almost any other name than his was appended to a warrant for—to a document bearing this import!"

"And I—I am glad of it!" declared the accused, with a stern emphasis, his dark-brown eyes looking fairly red by the light of the hall-lamp. "Being thus, I'll have fewer debtors to settle with in the end!"

"The end of a rope—and that end with a noose!"

Bitter, sneering, full of venom were those words, which came from the dark shadow outside the open door. No one was visible as Westlake and Garland looked that way, but the younger man had no need to ask from whose lips that envenomed shaft had been sped.

Another swift glance showed him that Ethelyn had caught those vicious words, and in hopes of sparing her more, the young man stepped forward and yielded himself a prisoner.

"Do your sworn duty, gentlemen, and do it right quickly!" he said, sternly, almost forcing his way to the door.

But as he reached the marble landing without, he turned his head for a parting word, eyes yearningly fixed upon the pale, anguished face of his dearly beloved as she leaned against her father, with clasped hands and tear wet lashes.

"Good-by—good-by, my—my dear friends!"

"Good-by—until we meet before judge and jury!" mockingly called out that raucous voice as detective and constable hurried their charge down the flight of marble steps to the street, where a close carriage awaited their coming.

The speaker was none other than Oren Poole, under whose oath that warrant of arrest for murder had been issued; and as he flung that bitter taunt after his hated rival—rival in more senses than one—he advanced to pause in that doorway, before it could close to exclude him.

"Good evening, Mr. Garland, and you, fair Ethelyn," he spoke, doffing hat and bowing low, a cynical smile upon his face although his tones softened in a marked degree.

Ethelyn gave a violent start as she heard and saw Poole, and hot indignation seemed to lend her renewed strength, for she drew away from the support she had so seriously needed an instant before, face and eyes glowing as she cried out:

"Coward! Oh, you base, unmanly cur!"

Oren Poole flinched a bit, but quickly ral-

lied, saying with forced calmness as he confronted father and daughter:

"Hard words, Miss Garland! And you may hold hard feelings against me, now, for the steps I have taken, but in the end you will give me heartfelt thanks for showing Leonard Westlake up in his true colors: a liar, hypocrite, thief! Those are evil qualities enough, one would think, but there remains still worse behind."

"Leonard Westlake killed my step-father, and now he stands before all the world with the mark of Cain upon his forehead: *he is a murderer*, sure as there is a Heaven above our heads!"

"Liar!" cried Ethelyn, too intensely angry to pick and choose her words. "Leonard Westlake a—all that? Bah! I'd ten million times over think you killed that poor old man, just to ruin the hero your soul is too cowardly to let you harm in any more open fashion!"

Until now, Thurlow Garland had kept silence, but like one who had heard far more than enough, he said, with cold gravity:

"Good-evening, Mr. Poole. Oblige me by taking your leave, will you? I wish to close my house, and— Good-evening, I bid you, sir!"

Oren Poole gave way, and the heavy door was promptly closed in his face. A low, bitter laugh parted his lips as he turned to depart.

"Kicked out, is it? Well, even if I've lost both hand and fortune by dealing this sweet blow, still I'll maintain that 'twas well worth while!"

CHAPTER XV.

AT WORK UNDER COVER.

THERE is a good deal of every-day truth in the saying that "time works wonders," and the Hillyard affair was not to prove an exception.

But little more than a week had passed away since the discovery of that Nob Hill tragedy, which so intensely interested all San Francisco: yet now, only eight days later, mention was hardly to be heard of the case, and the newspapers almost entirely ignored the matter.

Yet that passing week had not been entirely without events of interest, circumstances which were all leading toward the one ending.

Leonard Westlake was placed behind the bars, by virtue of the warrant sworn out by Oren Poole; but quietly as he had surrendered to the officers detailed to make that arrest, it was speedily made evident that he intended to fight for his life and liberty, and to fight hard.

No one on the outside appeared to know just who was engineering matters for the accused, or just how it was all being arranged; but word right quickly spread far and wide that Leonard Westlake had secured to conduct his defense, the best firm of criminal lawyers on the Slope, in addition to a goodly number of lesser lights who were doubtless expected to look after minor details, and pave the way for the brilliant luminaries.

Yet there was no effort made looking toward delay, on their part. No objection was raised when the question of a preliminary examination came up, and without too plainly showing their line of defense, those in conduct of Westlake's case forced the prosecution to play their best cards first.

Although the result of that examination was that the accused was held for trial on the charge of willful murder, nearly all legal critics on the outside agreed that Westlake—through his counsel—had won at least a point over the opposition.

The evidence brought forth varied but little from that given before the coroner's jury when the inquest was held on the body; but the court considered that sufficiently strong against Westlake, to hold him for trial, without bail.

There was one witness at this hearing who had not appeared before the coroner, and her testimony bore hard against the accused.

This new witness was Mrs. Hillyard, who had made all possible haste back to town as soon as her son, Oren Poole, sent her word of the awful affair at home.

With the tragedy still a novelty, there was

no lack of newspaper reporters on hand when her arrival was expected, and the dramatic scene which then took place—the widow in hysterics, supported by her son—filled at least a column in each daily.

Mrs. Hillyard took matters very hard, yet it was past denial that there was a great deal of fierce vengeance mingled with her passionate grief, and the reporters tired of her bitter denunciations far sooner than she did of pouring those vitriolic sentences forth.

It was the widow's testimony that proved to be the main sensation at the preliminary hearing, although she really brought forth no actual proof to fix that terrible deed upon the accused.

Still, she deepened the public prejudice against Leonard Westlake by dwelling upon his fierce and bitter hatred for the man whose dear life had come to such a cruel ending, and under oath bore witness that not once only, but times almost beyond computation, Leonard Westlake had threatened to "do for" his step-father.

Mrs. Hillyard also testified that, to her positive knowledge, the murdered man had the sum of five thousand dollars in gold and bank-notes in his home safe, for she had noticed it when on the point of leaving home to pay that ill-starred visit and questioned him as to why he ran so great a risk.

Hilary Hillyard explained the fact by speaking of his insurance policies, the semi-annual premium on which was drawing due, and he was making ready to meet that heavy obligation.

Meanwhile, the will of the dead man had been read, and some of its provisions made known; among them was a solemn request that his remains should be transported to the home of his childhood, in far-away Vermont, there to be buried by the side of his long-dead parents.

In accordance with this desire, then, as soon after the inquest as matters could be arranged, the fire scarred remains were prepared for shipment, and started upon their long journey, under a chosen escort.

Then, too, claims were entered for the insurance money, by the widow, through her legal representative.

It was not until these claims were entered, that John Prince, Insurance Special, came out of the retirement into which he had gone immediately after the inquest, and strongly advised the agents not to be in any particular haste about getting through with their part of the work.

As was only natural where such large sums were at stake, they were swift enough to catch at a straw, and begged the detective to tell them why he gave such advice, and what new facts he had discovered.

"You wouldn't talk so without fair excuse, Prince, and I just know it!" declared Horace Kavanaugh, excitedly. "You know—what?"

"That there's tricks in all trades but ours!"

Prince John would say nothing more positive, and for the present the insurance men had to hold content with that quaint quotation.

Still, to those who were in the secret of his real business, John Prince was anything but idle, though he set about his work after an unobtrusive, quiet method peculiarly his own.

"Divil bless him, anyhow!" Kavanaugh blurted out, on one occasion when the question came up at a meeting of the insurance men. "It's more than once I've caught myself in a fair way to be cussing the man, of late, because he don't do wonders on top of marvels; but then I know I'm playing the fool me own self, faith!"

"Then, you really think?" hesitated another member, dubiously.

"That Prince John's more like a bed-bug than a mosquito, faith: he don't kape up such an infernal buzzing, but—he gets there, just the same!"

There was a good deal of truth in this statement, if precious little poetry, for Prince John was busily at work, aiming for the one end desired by all those in whose employ he was, and dark though the riddle had seemed at first glance, tangled though the knot appeared when first taken hold of, the Insurance Detective fancied he began to see light ahead, after all.

Although working so quietly, Prince John had wasted precious little time since the coroner's jury brought in their verdict, and on the evening when the thread of our story is taken up again, he was on business bent, although strolling along through the lonely portion of San Francisco, so slowly that few would have set him down as other than an idler, or out-of-work artisan.

At the time treated of, that portion of the town which was locally known as skirting "the sand lots," was not only lonely by night, but was of evil reputation, hardly second to that of "Chinatown."

To all seeming this slowly lounging shape, moving slouchingly along through the gloom, hands in pockets and head bent like one moodily brooding over a streak of bad luck, was a habitant of that section, in all probability loafing there in the gloom, simply because he had neither money nor credit to induce his visiting any of the groggeries near by.

There certainly was nothing in either garb or manner of this slow-moving figure to indicate the wary, vigilant "cop," and yet, on two or three occasions when he came face to face with other shapes there in that unsavory locality, Prince John found them to fade away just as swiftly, if not quite so silently as shadows in fact.

Whatever reasons he might have for loafing in that quarter, it in the end became clear that the Insurance Detective had one more failure to score, for, taking due precautions against exposing the light, he struck a match to note the time by his watch, then gave a low mutter of grim disgust, turning his face toward the city proper.

Now that he had given over his hopes for that particular occasion, Prince John showed more life and animation, moving far more briskly, yet doing hardly less deep thinking.

He was working along a line which he had marked out, purely through instinct: guess-work, it might almost be called. But he still held fair faith in his theory, although this was not the first time his grim hopes had failed him.

He was trying to reason out just where he had made his error, and his interest had grown so strong on that point through repeated failures, that he paid very little attention to his own surroundings although he knew the city so well, by now, that there was scant risk of his going astray.

Yet, absorbed though he was in busy thought, the odd instinct which surely comes to men whose lives are turned into more than ordinarily dangerous channels, was fully awake with Prince John this dark night, and hardly knowing why he did so, the Insurance Detective made a sudden step aside, even as he sprung forward.

So far as he knew, there had been no sound to warn him of coming peril, yet just as he took that oblique step, there was a savage rush of vicious enemies, and the long blade which would otherwise have buried its length in his back, left a double track as of fire between arm and side, knife-hilt or hard knuckles bruising the firm flesh as that deadly thrust was checked.

With a gasping ejaculation Prince John swayed aside, turning as he felt that smart—stinging keenly as though a tongue of flame had licked his quivering flesh!

"Now—all together!" came a deep-toned voice from one of those human shadows. "Kill him! No racket, but—kill him, boys!"

While giving these savage orders, the bloodthirsty thug gathered himself together for another and surer blow, calling upon his fellows to do the deed he fully meant to accomplish himself.

Taken unawares though he surely was, Prince John showed neither dismay nor fear, but springing back and aside, to perfect his guard, he gave vent to a wild, shrill, Indian-like yell, then plunged forward to meet his assailants—and the fight was fairly on!

His left arm flew out and under that knife-armed hand, knocking the weapon aside and foiling that vicious stroke. At the same instant his right arm lunged out, his iron-knuckled fist striking the thug fairly on the chin, sending him staggering back like a drunken man!

As the detective dealt this blow, he re-

ceived another, the force of which was partially broken by his sudden lunge ahead; but it sent an ocean of twinkling stars whirling before his eyes, and came near destroying his balance for good.

"Down him! Now—slug him—for keeps!"

Half-stunned by that blow, and knowing that this was to be a fight to the finish, Prince John rallied, striking out half-blindly, breaking away from those fierce hands which sought to close upon his person.

He hit, and was struck in turn. He felt that weapons were being used upon his person, and as another cruel stroke took effect upon his head, a wild, savage lust for vengeance took full possession of his whirling brain.

He grappled with one of the thugs, and then fell before a third blow which seemed fit to crush in his skull; but in falling he still held fast to the thug with the knife, crushing the villain beneath his own body, and feeling as though death was claiming him, he managed to draw a revolver with which he opened fire, blindly, aimlessly.

CHAPTER XVI.

IDENTIFYING THE DEAD THUG.

LONELY though that spot was where the ambushade was sprung upon the Insurance Detective, it was not entirely beyond the arm of the law, and hearing that fierce, Apache-like yell, one stalwart policeman gripped his heavy night club, felt of his revolver, then sounded the call for help as he hurried off in that direction: for now his trained ears could catch sounds which told him only too plainly that devilry was afoot, and that in all probability he had hot and deadly work cut out for him.

But Chief Paulette was too wise an officer to put any but thoroughly trustworthy men on duty in that section, and without loss of time the patrolman advanced, hearing the response made by his companion on that lonely beat.

But the signals which were meant to notify other officers of work on hand, reached the ears of those against whom the move was being made, and swiftly as the policemen advanced, they were too late to take a very active part in that fracas.

Prince John had partly rallied from those cruel blows, and holding one burly knave under a hand and a knee, he was trying his level best to drop another of the murderous thugs, two of whom could be glimpsed as they fled in frantic haste.

But the foul blows which brought the brave detective to earth, also served to dim his sight and unsteady his hand, and both shadows faded away out of sight, apparently untouched by the whistling lead which he sent after them.

After all, it was purely fighting instinct which nerved the detective and enabled him to bear up under blows which would have laid out for all time, nineteen men out of every score; instinct which made him struggle against these, his friends, when their hands offered him aid.

It was fortunate, perhaps, that one of the officers recognized the detective at once, for that insured him friendly handling while he was being disarmed.

That last fierce struggle ended in a brief oblivion, from which John Prince finally awoke, the fighting instinct of the detective still uppermost, for he muttered, hoarsely:

"Nail him! Don't let him slip—where is—Hullo, Morgan?"

"It's Morgan, right enough, sir," quickly answered the policeman thus recognized. "And the fellow's fast enough, too, never fear, sir."

"There were three, anyway," said Prince, brushing a hand across his face, where blood was mingled with sweat and dust which dimmed his vision as he peered dizzily around. "I thought—didn't I drop any of the devils, then?"

"There's one of 'em done for, fast enough, sir," answered Morgan, making a motion toward a dark shape lying in the dust. "He meant to do for you, I reckon, but looks like he'd done for himself, instead!"

"Fell on his own knife, looks like, sir," added the second patrolman in elucidation,

as Prince John slowly crept on his hands and knees a bit nearer that motionless form.

Just then there came the first sound of "the rush wagon," which had been called up by one of the officers, while his mate looked after the then unconscious detective.

As customary when on night duty, the patrol-wagon was supplied with lights, and as the yellow rays from these fell upon the body lying yonder in mask of blood and dirt, with long blade buried to its very hilt in his broad breast, Officer Morgan grimly spoke:

"You played for keeps, Mr. Prince; you sunk your shaft clean down to bed-rock!"

"What do you mean by—Ah!"

With his brain rapidly clearing, Prince John saw what the officer meant by that grim comment, and for a brief space he gazed soberly upon that corpse: for that the thug was dead, he could not doubt.

"It's no tool of mine, gentlemen," the detective said, as he turned away from that ugly spectacle. "I've got more than one token from that very blade on my person, and—I can only account for it by his falling on his own point as he went to earth in a heap!"

That undoubtedly was the correct solution, and no more was said on that subject just then.

The dead man was lifted into the wagon, and Prince John climbed to a seat beside the driver, saying that he would go to the Central, for he preferred to make his own report of the affair.

That drive did not last long, but the interval was quite sufficient for the Insurance Detective to decide upon just how much of his reasons for being in that portion of the city, alone and at such an hour, he cared to tell Chief Paulette.

When the station was reached, the body was taken from the wagon and turned over to the police-surgeon on night-duty.

Chief Paulette was present, not having left his office for the night, and while they stood by the stretcher on which that form was now lying, watching the movements of the surgeon, Prince John briefly told how he had been assailed, and the manner in which this fellow had come to his ending.

Not many words were needed to make this explanation clear, for a single glance at the Insurance Detective was enough to tell how roughly he had been handled.

His face had escaped anything worse than a scratch or two, and one painful bruise from a hard fist; but his clothes were actually in rags, and more than half-torn off of his body.

There were fresh blood stains visible, and though he had ere this assured himself that none of those cuts were of serious extent, Prince John knew he bore at least half a dozen such mementoes of that brief but hot and savage struggle for life against odds.

Brief though his account was, Prince John had hardly ended it before the surgeon gave over his efforts on behalf of the thug.

"He's past assistance your Honor," was his report when the Insurance Detective ceased speaking. "An anatomist could hardly have sounded his heart's center more accurately."

"Very well, surgeon. Care for the body as usual, please. And—did you ever meet the fellow before this, think, Prince?"

The Insurance Detective took another close look at that grim, pain-distorted face, then drew back, shaking his head in negation.

"No, sir. He's a complete stranger to me."

"Hadn't I better look to your hurts, sir?" gravely asked the surgeon, probably mistaking that unusual pallor for weakness incident upon the loss of blood; and with the cue thus given him, Chief Paulette insisted upon that attention without further delay.

"Why didn't you tell me, man alive?" he cried, almost angrily, for he was learning to highly respect, almost love, this cool-witted, steel-nerved detective from across the Great Divide. "All this time lost, and you suffering for attention! Why didn't you speak, Prince?"

"Because I forgot that I'd been out, chief," with a low, amused laugh, but at the same time resigning himself to the practiced touch of the police-surgeon. "If you could doctor my poor clothes, now!"

The medical man chuckled softly, then answered:

"If I was smart enough for *that*, sir, I'd hardly be serving the city at my present scale of wages. Now—steady, please!"

After all, Prince John had escaped marvelously well, considering how deadly had been the intentions of the gang of thugs. His worst cuts were where the first blow, so luckily foiled in its full intent, had cut a double slit through skin and flesh as it ran between arm and side; but these hurts called for nothing more elaborate than a few strips of court-plaster, and a neat bandage for body and for arm.

There were several scalp wounds, made by billy or slung-shot, and though the surgeon, after a careful examination, declared the bones were all intact, they really bothered Prince John far more than his other injuries.

It did not take very long to patch him up sufficiently for all purposes, and then Chief Paulette led the detective across and back to his own private quarters, placing cigars and liquor before his guest.

"A smoke, yes, but not any internal fire, thank you, Paulette," laughingly elected the Special, choosing a weed and lighting it as he leaned back at ease in that cushioned chair.

When both were smoking cozily, Chief Paulette abruptly spoke out:

"Is it any of my business what you were doing in that section, my friend?"

"Well, hardly, chief," quietly answered the detective.

"All right, then. But it's no harm to ask if you have altered your mind about that dead fellow, out yonder?"

"If that means have I recalled ever meeting him before, no, sir. Can you place him, chief?"

"Easily enough, Prince. His name is Sam Pitkin, and he was born in this city. He came of a thoroughly bad race, and has done mighty little to improve the family reputation."

"A bad egg, then?"

"Rotten to the very heart, Prince! He is—or *was*—a pickpocket, ball thief, till-tapper, as a kid; and since he grew up—well, there are few worse or more dangerous crooks on the Slope than Sam Pitkin was—until you cured him, to night!"

"Involuntarily, remember, chief," gravely said the detective. "I was blind, and nearly senseless when I grabbed the fellow. I never touched that knife, thank Heaven!"

"Good luck went with you, though, else that blade would have found a sheath in your heart instead of Pitkin's. You say he called out to kill, didn't you?"

"Some one did, and I'm fairly certain 'twas him. Now—since you've his past record so well, chief, of course you can say just where he used to hang out, when off duty?"

"I could name you a round dozen places, for that matter, Prince, but I reckon the old-junk man known in our circles as Old Pap Purkiss, had the most of his company when Sam wasn't out looking for a soft snap."

It was not often that Prince John permitted his face to betray his brain, but just now he was hardly his usual self, and a change, slight though it was, passing over that countenance at that last sentence, gave Chief Paulette cue for the quick query.

"You know Old Pap Purkiss, then Prince?"

"I have heard of the name, yes," quietly answered the detective. "Is it the same fellow who holds forth in a shanty, out by the sand-lots?"

"The same fellow, I reckon, Prince. There's hardly room in Frisco for two Old Pap Purkisses, please the pigs!"

"He isn't very deep in your good books, then?"

"Well, hardly! He ostensibly makes a living by running a junk-shop, but unless I'm way off my base, Old Pap deals far more extensively in gold, silver and jewelry, than in scrap-iron, rags, bones and old bottles!"

"In still plainer words, you believe he is 'a fence,' chief?"

"So firmly do I believe that, Prince, I would be willing to bet long odds to that effect. I've been watching and waiting for a fair chance to catch the old rascal foul,

but up to date he has fooled me. But I'll nail him fast, yet; and when I *do*—well, he'll pay the costs, and that will be none the lighter for my long waiting!"

After a little more conversation, Prince John left his seat, declaring his purpose of seeking his hotel and his bed, trusting to get up feeling a vast deal brighter in the morning.

CHAPTER XVII.

LOOKING UP AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

ON the day following his night adventure with the Frisco thugs, Prince John was afoot, on business bent, both feeling and looking in remarkably good condition for one who had so recently passed through a finish fight against long odds.

That dull, throbbing pain had left his head, and barring a little soreness, those cuts gave him hardly any inconvenience.

The bruise upon his cheekbone showed little color, and was nothing to attract unwelcome notice; and while Prince John found his left arm just a bit stiff and awkward from cut and bandage, no one not in the secret would have deemed him other than in the best of condition.

After doing full justice to a good breakfast, Prince John leisurely made his way to the Central, there to report to Chief Paulette, spending a few minutes in friendly chatter, then taking his leave without giving that official even the slightest hint as to the course he had laid out for himself that day.

That course was determined after learning what and who the dead thug had been, the night before; but Prince John was not quite ready to take Virgo Paulette wholly into his confidence, as yet.

Wearing a plain, ordinary looking, "hand-me-down" suit of clothes, such as an artisan or moderately prosperous day laborer might have possessed, the Insurance Detective without any further disguise, paid a visit to the scene of his recent fight for dear life.

There was nothing new to be gleaned there, but even "an old hand" may be excused for feeling a certain sort of interest in the spot where he had rubbed shoulders with grim death; and then, too, the hour was still a bit early for aristocratic residents of the sand lots.

For that was the delectable quarter toward which the Insurance Detective was making his way on this occasion, and it was in strong hopes of renewing an old acquaintance that Prince John left the blood-marked scene of that hot brush, stepping out more briskly, now.

"As the chief says, there's hardly room in Frisco for a pair of Old Pap Purkisses, and if this *should* prove to be my man—why, man, dear, it can't *help* but be that gay old darling!"

With a little chuckle, doubtless born of some past memory, Prince John gave himself this mental assurance; but busy though his thoughts were, he never for an instant relaxed his covert vigilance, now that he was drawing close to "the debatable ground."

Prince had covered this ground fairly well on the afternoon and evening preceding his fight with the thugs, when he was laying a trap in which his own life formed the tempting bait, and while he had then been in complete ignorance as to his old-time acquaintance having located in that neighborhood, he had taken note of an old junk-shop, and now took his chances on that proving to be the den which gave shelter to Old Pap Purkiss.

Gifted with a strong sense of locality, Prince John could have gone straight to that building, but he made no such attempt, for reasons of his own, which he held were good and sufficient to excuse his apparently aimless windings and twistings hither and yon.

For one thing, the detective knew that his movements were being spied upon, by at least one person; and having put this past doubt in his own mind by leading the shadow a merry dance for a few minutes, Prince John altered his tactics, so maneuvering as to win a pretty fair look at the fel-

low's face before that quick double could be met and foiled.

It was a face which the detective failed to recognize as one which he had seen before, but as he took note of sundry fresh and ugly-looking bruises, the ghost of a smile flitted across his own visage.

"Dollars to cents you're one of the ducks who ran up against my bunch of fives, last night!" mentally wagered the Insurance Special, as the fellow skulked hurriedly away, hat slouching and shoulder lifting as a partial mask for that discolored countenance.

"I say, pardner!" hailed Prince John, like one who desires further communication; but instead of granting that favor, as an honest man certainly would have done, this fellow only hastened his steps, turning down the first by-way, seemingly bent on getting out of eye-range as speedily as possible.

Prince John made no chase, very well content to get rid of the human shadow so easily, yet a goodly bit annoyed to find that his steps were so surely being noted, just now, when he really wished for privacy.

"You wouldn't come when I was aching for it, you rascal, and now—well, let's see how many more there are of your kidney, first!"

Meaning to leave no room for doubting, Prince John continued strolling hither and yon, after an idle, aimless fashion, seeming to take no note of his surroundings, but in reality permitting naught to escape his keen eyes; but though he spent fully an hour after that fashion, he failed to discover another shadow, or any signs of his movements being spied upon.

Satisfied at length, the detective edged his way nearer the point which had been in his mind's eye from the very first, and like one drawn thither through idle curiosity than aught else, he approached the little, weather-beaten, ramshackly building whose dingy windows displayed a collection of odds and ends, the greater portion of which were sufficiently worthless to proclaim the business conducted under that roof.

There was no sign displayed, except a rusty cook-stove with one leg and never a lid; a bottomless chair; the battered copper-bottom of a wash boiler; and sundry articles of even less worth, all of which sufficiently well proclaimed the truth.

Prince John made his final detour, still with that admirable assumption of lazy idleness, but as he still saw nothing which indicated espial upon himself, he moved on to the front of the building, then paused before one of the smoke and dust-stained windows, staring at a portion of the display there made: a battered old saber, and a brace of well-worn yet still serviceable revolvers.

Up to that moment there had not been a sign of life about the premises, but when Prince John paused in front of that window, it was like the first touch of a fly to web: out from his den rushed the spider!

In this case the spider proved to be an old man, roughly clad in poorly fitting garments which seemed scarcely less aged than himself.

His build was quite muscular, but his broad, massive shoulders were so bowed as to almost constitute a deformity, and rheumatism or some like ailment had drawn his body to one side, giving him a curiously crab-like gait.

His face was strongly featured, and not so uncomely, despite his unkempt hair and long, heavy beard.

All this Prince John took in with a single glance out of an eye-corner, for hastily as the old fellow had come forward, he paused just as abruptly at the open door, then shrunk back inside like a frightened snail into its shell.

But as Prince John showed no signs of interest in aught else but those weapons so temptingly displayed in the window, one hand juggling a few coins in his pocket, as though counting over his little wealth to judge whether or no he had enough, or could afford to purchase, the human spider slowly protruded his unkempt head through the door for another and better look.

"For sale or just in on a ticket, boss?" asked Prince, without removing his eye from those weapons. "The heavy silver, for instance?"

That head jerked back at the first word, but then came forward again, fears lessened by the manner of speech made use of.

"That magnificent sword, my dear? Ah, that is a treasure—a wonderful prize—wonderful prize, sir!" croakingly cried the junk-dealer as his great hands rubbed together with a rasping sound.

"Ah, come off!" scoffingly cried the young man, at the same time turning quickly, to fairly face the junk-dealer. "What do you take me for, anyway, Pap Purkiss?"

With a low, husky gasp, the old man shrunk away from that front, his yellow face turning a shade or two paler as he encountered those keen, bright eyes and noticed that half-mocking smile.

Without further word or sound, the junk-dealer backed crab-like in through the open door of his den, and only for the swift action of the Insurance Special, he would have swung that barrier to behind him.

"Ah, come, now!" exclaimed Prince, one foot deftly interposing to aid hand in catching that moving wood. "Tisn't closing time, and I just know it, Pap! Then—there's that dandy toad-sticker in the window!"

With laughing force the detective pushed back the door, entering the room after its owner, who seemed afraid to show greater resistance even to this plainly dreaded visitor.

On his part, Prince John showed no resentment at such an odd, unbusiness-like reception, but pushed on to where the window-display could be better viewed from that side, still appearing deeply interested in those weapons, and especially in the saber.

"Of course it isn't worth more than its weight as old iron, Pap," he said, reaching out a hand to gently almost reverently touch that implement of war, seemingly unconscious of the fact that words and manner were wholly at variance with each other. "Give you half a dollar for it, though, just for luck!"

"Oh, my conscience!" fairly exploded the junkman, flinging up his dingy paws in horror, seemingly losing the fears which surely had assailed him at first sight of that face and figure.

"No you don't, Pap," with a short chuckle. "I wouldn't offer an old copper for *your* conscience, for that's something you couldn't deliver if I was fool enough to buy; it is not, never was, nor ever will be!"

"A good joke—a merry joke, faith!" cackled the old fellow, rasping hands and shuffling his ill-shod feet. "But this magnificent relic of war! This truly splendid—why, my dear sir! Only look at it, fair! Just examine how—pardon, but are your fingers dry, dear sir?"

Producing a handkerchief which was only a few degrees worse soiled than his hands, Old Pap Purkiss vigorously scrubbed those wrinkled but still sinewy members, then carefully folded the dirty cloth around the rusty and dusty scabbard, detached the saber from the hook to which it hung, tenderly caressing the weapon as he stepped back from the window.

"Ah, the darling! The marvel! The almost priceless treasure!" Old Pap Purkiss murmured while gently dusting the battered scabbard with his breath. "To think that the great, the glorious, the *only* General George Washington wielded this magnificent brand—"

"Oh, take a drop before you punch a hole through the sky with your hat-rack, Pap!" irreverently cut in the supposed customer, reaching forth to lay impious hand on that awe-inspiring relic. "If Hatchet George could only hear you lying like that!"

"I make my oath, sir! I swear on the good book that it is even so, my dear gentleman!" hastily affirmed the junk-dealer. "Would I lie to a gentleman so fine as you? Never! I have my honest living to make, but I make that not by lying like—eh?"

Old Pap Purkiss broke off abruptly, for this seeming customer tossed that priceless relic aside with careless hand, then closed a gentle grip upon a crooked shoulder the better to force those shifty eyes to squarely meet his keen gaze.

"Still the same old liar and glib-tongued fraud, I see, Purkiss!"

"I don't—what do you mean, sir?" gasped the old junkman, flinching beneath that

touch, before those eyes. "What do you want, if—"

"Well, I don't want old iron, particularly, but I *do* want a nice, fresh cadaver, Old Stiff!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

OLD PAP PURKISS.

PRINCE JOHN threw off all disguise as he spoke, and the junk-dealer could no longer doubt his being fully recognized.

He shrunk back with a low, husky cry, as though he would break away from that touch to seek safety in flight or in hiding; but Prince John was not ready to part with him quite yet, and his grip tightened upon that shrinking shoulder.

But neither was it his wish to frighten the old fellow too badly, and so he sent a pleasant laugh into his voice while saying:

"Ah, don't *you* be foolish, old fellow! The past is dead, so far as I am concerned, and this is nothing worse than a friendly call from an old acquaintance. Honest, Purkiss."

The junk-dealer ceased his effort to break away from that detaining grasp, yet it was plain enough from his trembling limbs and his unsteady voice that he was far from feeling at ease.

"I'm not—before Heaven, sir, I'm living on the dead square, now!" he asserted, trying to meet that gaze, but failing after the briefest of frightened up-glances.

"That's all right, Pap, and even if you weren't—"

"But I *am*—honest-to-heaven, I am, sir! I haven't turned a trick for—not since the time when you—I'm hoeing a mighty hard row, now, Mr. Prince, but it's clean honest!"

"Of course it is, my dear fellow," smilingly coincided the detective, but hardly with the manner of one who was being hoodwinked by those flurried protestations.

"Just as though *you* would play crooked! Why, Old Pap, the very idea is preposterous!"

The junk-dealer forced a smile, but it was a ghastly effort at mirth, and failed to cover over his real anxiety from those observant eyes.

"When you vow that you're living on the dead level, Old Stiff, that is plenty proof to me, who know you so well from past experience," blandly added the detective, both hands resting lightly on those bowed shoulders, a quizzical yet penetrating glow in those keen eyes.

"I am, all the same, though, Mr. Prince."

"Never the ghost of a doubt as to that, old man; but no matter how intensely disagreeable it may be to a reformed body—I should say, reformed gentleman—old acquaintances *will* hang around after—When did you see Sam Pitkin last, Old Stiff?"

Sharp and stern came that query, all the more disconcerting from its strong contrast with the tones of an instant earlier.

The junk-dealer flinched as though from an ugly blow, giving a hollow groan as his muscles yielded and he fell into a state of seeming collapse.

Prince John made no effort to stay those yielding limbs, however, and rallying in time to save himself from a fall, Old Pap Purkiss huskily gasped forth, like one who hardly knows his tongue is betraying its master.

"I *told* the boys better, but they wouldn't listen! I *said* it'd come to worse, but they just laughed me down, for such big pay—"

Like one who just begins to realize that he is working himself ill, Old Pap Purkiss clapped a hand over his mouth, shrinking still further away, shivering visibly as he noted those glittering orbs reading his tell-tale face so certainly.

"That's all right, Pap," quietly said the Insurance Special, at the same time taking a seat on the corner of an old stove which had not yet been doomed to the fate of scrap-iron. "Now, my hearty, you and I've got to chin a wee bit together."

"I don't know anything, sir," mumbled the old knave, huskily.

"Well, then we'll play you do, anyway. And as an entering wedge, Old Stiff, why did those fellows—friends of yours, by the way! Why did Sam Pitkin and his pals try to shut off my wind, last night?"

"Cross my heart, Mr. Prince, but I didn't have any finger in that fool job!" earnestly declared the junk-dealer, seeming to rally his wits and steady his nerves again, now that the blow had fairly fallen.

"Of course not, since you have reformed so thoroughly, Old Stiff," the detective chuckled, maliciously. "What amazes me is to think that you would permit any of your good friends picking up such a wicked job!"

Those snaky eyes stole a shy glance up to that face—for while Prince was seated, Purkiss was crouched on a still lower level, just as those yielding limbs had let his body down to the floor—and then as quickly lowered, for Prince was steadily scanning that hairy visage.

Still, that glance seemed sufficient to still further lighten the personal fears of the junk-dealer, since he spoke with more distinctness and in a trifle less shaky tones:

"I did my level best, sir. I tried to stop 'em, for I knew 'twas a mighty hard nut they were thinking to crack—"

"Thanks for the compliment, Mr. Purkiss!"

The old rascal gave a shrug and a forced smile while saying:

"It cost me a mighty heap to find that out for myself, sir, back at the old stamping-grounds."

"That was when you were known as Old Stiff, the Body-snatcher, coolly said the detective. "Now you are Mr. Purkiss, and trying to fit yourself for the—well, never mind! You say you tried to talk your good friends out of the notion of sending me over the range, then?"

"Hope I may die if I didn't, sir! But they wouldn't listen to the old map, for a cent! They said such big pay wasn't to be let slip, sir!"

"That makes twice you've mentioned it, Purkiss, so do the rest, who was to put up the big pile of sugar?"

The junk-dealer hesitated, one slightly trembling hand going up to smooth his tangled beard, his little eyes flashing uneasily around the cluttered up store-room, as though he more than half anticipated the proximity of eavesdroppers.

"Easy telling is heap sight better than tough telling, Purkiss," the Insurance Special quietly hinted, after a brief silence.

"It's telling that might—ugh!"

That hand left beard for throat, as though its owner felt the touch of cold steel; but then the junk-dealer rose to his feet and cautiously crept toward the door, peering outside in a semi-circle, like one who wishes to assure himself that no unwelcome ears or eyes are about.

At ease on that particular point, the old sinner closed the front door and let fall a heavy iron bar which fitted into a strong jaw beyond the edge of the door, then came on tip-toe back to where the Insurance Detective was quietly watching and waiting.

"I trust that means you're going to talk without forcing, Purkiss," remarked John Prince, gravely. "If only for old times' sake, I'd really hate to give you the collar, but—you understand, Pap?"

"Fore Heaven, sir, I'd tell you in a minute, if I only knew!"

"Easy, old fellow!"

"Would I dast lie to your face, sir?" earnestly spoke the junk dealer, those bowed shoulders bringing his face on a level with that of the crouching detective.

"You'd ought to know better, for a fact, Purkiss, but you've already let leak too much not to leak still more. Who offered to pay those fellows big money for slipping my wind, then?"

Prince John spoke coldly, sternly, now, and there was naught of jest or of mirth in either face or eyes as he put this question.

Old Pap Purkiss surely knew the peril he would run in willfully crossing this man, but he unflinchingly met that gaze, saying:

"It's naked truth, boss. I *don't* know who offered the boys big pay for downing you to stay, for the bargain wasn't fixed up here, and when I told Sam I wouldn't mix in, for ten times the whole boodle—well, of course that shut me out. Can't you see it, sir?"

Although rather strongly against his will, Prince John was forced to believe that Old Pap Purkiss was speaking the truth.

It was hard, this finding a break in the trail just when he began to feel confident that he had found the clue he had been searching for through this past week and more, and his sobered countenance plainly betrayed as much to those covertly watching eyes.

"If I only could, sir, I'd tell you without asking, but I don't know. Still, if you only could—"

Old Pap Purkiss broke off again, and with such a peculiar expression of countenance that Prince John caught a ray of hope, quickly asking:

"If I only could—do what? Out with it, you old villain!"

With a warning gesture, the junk-dealer rose to his feet and once more set off on tip-toe, peering out through the dusty windows, lifting the iron bar to open the front door sufficiently far for his shaggy pate to protrude through the crack.

Seeing nothing outside to justify the suspicions which were seemingly troubling him not a little, Old Pap Purkiss just as cautiously inspected his kitchen, or "living room," then came back to his guest, bending close to whisper:

"I don't dast to talk too much about—on some things—out here, sir; but if you'll go with me to my back room for a bit?"

"If I go, will you talk along a chalk-mark, Purkiss?" coldly asked the Insurance Special, rising to his feet at the same time.

The junk-dealer nodded his head vigorously, evidently deeming signs safer language than spoken words, just at present.

"All right, my pretty gentleman," added Prince, quietly producing a revolver, partly lifting the hammer and then twirling the fully-charged cylinder across his other palm. "I'll go into retirement with you for a bit, Purkiss, on that understanding."

The junk-dealer flinched a bit as he eyed that glittering weapon, and muttered, half sulkily:

"You'll have no need of that gun, sir, with me!"

"That's all right, my good friend," coolly answered the detective, as he replaced the weapon where the butt was most convenient to his trained clutch. "It'll be ready when needed, and I'll just add this much for your especial benefit, Pap: A bolt of lightning couldn't knock me out so mighty sudden that my hand and gun couldn't take pay out of your skull, Old Stiff!"

Purkiss forced a faint smile, meeting that burning gaze without a symptom of fear or flinching, saying in low tones:

"It's not you, sir, nor yet your gun that I'm afraid of, just now; but if any of the gang should happen to catch me telling—in the other room 'twill be safer, sir!"

Turning, Old Pap Purkiss led the way into his dirty, ill-kept kitchen, then through another door into a narrow passage, which terminated in a small, bare, cheerless-looking room, insufficiently lighted by one small window, now covered by an outside shutter of heavy planks.

"Take a seat, boss," the junk dealer said, pointing to a backless chair near the wall, at the same time squatting on his own heels with bowed back rubbing against the rough stones of a huge chimney.

Prince John moved the chair from where it stood, so fully on his guard against possible treachery that he would not trust to the flooring where that indicated spot had been discovered.

Seating himself, the detective touched his convenient pistol-butt, then gazed steadily into that face opposite, saying:

"Well, Purkiss? I'm here, on your own ground. Now—spiel!"

There was a brief silence, broken finally by the junk dealer, who leaned a bit further forward, speaking in a low but distinct whisper:

"How much is it worth to you, as an Insurance Detective, to learn the inside workings of the Hillyard case, John Prince?"

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD PAP PURKISS'S PROPOSAL.

It hardly seemed possible that Prince John could have been expecting anything of this nature, and beyond all doubt the junk-dealer fully counted on taking him wholly off his

guard; but the detective made no movement, showed no surprise, seeming far less interested than old Pap Purkiss himself, just then.

"What do you mean by that, pardner," he asked, easily, after a pause which lasted long enough to show how disappointed the old sinner was at having so palpably missed his target.

"Isn't it plain enough, sir?"

"To you, maybe, but as for me—well, hardly!"

"Then it's all a lie, what the papers said?"

"Said about what, Pap?"

"About the big insurance. Hillyard didn't carry such a mighty heap of it, then?"

Old Pap Purkiss clearly was disappointed, and yet, back of that showing, Prince John saw—or fancied he could detect—a confidence in that original belief.

Still, it was no part of his plans to expose his own hand through striking at the bait prematurely, and so he indifferently spoke:

"Oh, as to that, Pap, I reckon the papers weren't so far out of the way; but this isn't what I wanted, so much as—what makes you reckon I'd pay anything for information, though?"

"You say you won't, then?"

"I never positively refuse a bargain until it's fairly offered, Pap, and that you haven't done with yours, as yet. Show your hand, old man."

There was a brief pause, as though the junk-dealer was counting the chances for and against the success of his little scheme, but then he spoke again in that same clear, yet guarded whisper:

"If I could show you that Hilary Hillyard was killed for his insurance money, Mr. Prince, wouldn't that let the companies out of paying?"

The detective shook his head, with a faint smile, half of amusement, half of contempt.

"Not a bit of it, Purkiss."

"What? You're dead sure, boss?"

"I told you, didn't I?"

"Yes, but I thought—then there's no way for the companies to wiggle out of paying that big pile o' 'surance money, sir?"

Old Pap Purkiss spoke slowly, his face as well as his tones betraying how deeply he was disappointed by the turn matters were taking, so different from what he had evidently calculated upon.

Prince John waited long enough for those unsavory facts to take their due effect, then said:

"There is only one way out, that I can think of, Purkiss, and of course that is past hoping for, on their account."

"Which is—what way is that, boss?"

"By proving past all doubt that Hilary Hillyard is not dead, but still alive! If dead, unless by his own hand—a case of suicide, you understand, Purkiss?"

"Yes, sir. Then—you was sayin' boss?"

The old junk-dealer spoke in a whisper more husky than usual, and though he evidently tried to conceal that fact, it was plain to those keenly trained eyes that his interest in that case was still curiously strong.

"That only by proving Hillyard alive, or showing that he committed suicide in order to defraud them, there is absolutely no escape for the companies holding those risks."

Old Pap Purkiss drew a long breath at this positive statement, but that represented disappointment rather than aught else. At the same time the knowledge thus won seemed to unchain his tongue a bit, and he spoke more fluently than before.

"That's tough—mighty tough, sir! I'd counted on picking up a neat little sum against old age when—but if my news isn't worth anything to them, 'course I couldn't expect you to pay much!"

"After the ducats, eh, Purkiss?"

"Why wouldn't I be, sir? I'm growing old—old and shaky in the knees, sir! And when I struck this lead, I thought sure it'd bring me in enough to keep me out of the poorhouse for the rest of my days!"

Prince John gave a low, amused chuckle, leaning forward with elbows on knees, thumbs and fingers fitted neatly against each other, as he gazed quizzically into that dirty visage before him.

"You never read the papers, then, Pap?"

"Of course I do, sir, but why? I don't savvy you, sir!"

"The fellow who did for old Hillyard has been behind the bars for a good week, yet you're counting on big money for telling who killed the duck? That's mighty thin, old fellow!"

In his turn, Purkiss grinned, broader than that smile of the Insurance Special, like one who feels a wary antagonist has made a false play, or else glimpsing a chance which he fancied had entirely escaped his clutch.

"You mean young Westlake then, boss?"

"Why, who else could I mean, Purkiss?" with arching brow and surprised expression.

"Supposing he never turned that trick, boss? Supposing I knew that all the cops were barking on a false scent? Wouldn't that news be worth a little something, in hard cash—eh?"

"What is it you know, Purkiss?"

The junk-dealer held out one grimy paw, working his fingers suggestively; but instead of offering any sum of silver or gold, Prince John hinted at quite another mineral, by easily shifting his revolver so as to bring that plated butt more distinctly into view.

"Don't you reckon it's just a weenty bit too late in the day for you to hint at bribery, Old Stiff?"

"I don't—I only meant to ask—"

"While now you'll give without asking, Pap," coolly cut in the Insurance Special, throwing aside the disguise he had so far worn, speaking sharply and right to the point. "You'll tell the rest of it through pure love for me, old fellow?"

Pap Purkiss gave a sickly grin, brushing an unsteady hand over his face, then huskily muttered:

"I've said too much not to say more, eh?"

"Well, yes, that's about the size of it, old pard. You've got hold of something that may be worth more to us than it is to you, and—"

"I'm offering to sell it, boss!"

"Why buy, when we can have it free?" coolly asked the detective, seeming to enjoy the old rascal's discomfiture. "But talking off the line isn't business, so—one of two things, Purkiss."

"It's your bulge, boss—worse luck for me!"

"Tell me what you've learned, right here, or else make up your mind to tell it to Chief Paulette in his cozy little sweat-box!"

The old man bowed face in hands and remained crouched in an almost shapeless heap for the space of a minute or more.

Prince John did not attempt to hasten that decision, for he felt assured that he held the whip-hand, and that all was coming his way in good time.

Presently that heap resolved itself into something a little more human, and with an expression upon his face such as the detective had never seen there before: the fierce look of one who fairly thirsts for the heart's blood of an enemy.

Reaching out his bony but still powerful arms, working his fingers like claws, Old Pap Purkiss gratingly whispered:

"Give me one promise, boss, and then I'll—say you'll do what I want of you, sir!"

"No 'sight unseen' trade for me, Purkiss, please," coolly retorted the detective. "Say what you wish in plain words, then I'll talk business, yes or no. You want?"

The old sinner flashed a burning glance around them, although it seemed out of all reason that he could have dreaded eavesdroppers or espial there; then he spoke in low but vicious tones:

"You're a detective, Mr. Prince, and in the employ of the big insurance companies. That gives you an interest in this case, and makes me sure that you can do what I'm about to ask as price for my secret. Will you swear what I want, sir?"

"Not before hearing what that want is, surely, Pap."

"Swear that you'll show no mercy to the devil who killed Hilary Hillyard, then! Swear that you'll make him pull hemp, no matter who else cheats the law! Will you agree, John Prince?"

The detective made a gesture of annoyance, as a man will who feels his time is being wasted unnecessarily.

"What am I to gain by taking any such oath, Purkiss? Leonard Westlake is already under arrest, with proof enough already gathered to make him pull hemp, past all doubting. Then—"

A low, sneering chuckle coming from those heavily bearded lips cut Prince John short, and as he frowned darkly that way, Old Pap Purkiss flung out a hand in scorn, blurring forth:

"Leonard Westlake never touched old Hillyard, to hurt, and I can prove what I'm telling ye, too!"

"You really mean that, Purkiss?" slowly asked the detective, permitting something of his real interest to show itself just then.

"I really mean *just that*, boss: Leonard Westlake never hurt so much as a single hair of the old man's head!"

"Not with *his own hand*, perhaps, but how about hiring him slugged?"

"He never done that, neither, and I can prove it, sir!" repeated the junk-dealer, with a touch of dogged anger in his tones as though this reluctance to believe his assertions stung his pride.

Through all this, Prince John had been making a close study of the old man, and now he was fairly well satisfied that Pap Purkiss was telling the solid truth.

Leaning forward on his stool, the detective spoke earnestly:

"If you can prove past all doubting that the police have made a mistake in arresting young Westlake for killing Hilary Hillyard, and can show me how to fasten the crime upon the real criminal, Purkiss, I'll not only pay you for your trouble, but see that others pay you as well."

"And you'll make dead sure of the duck who slugged him, boss?" asked the old man, with almost feverish eagerness.

"I'll do that, too, or see that it is done, Purkiss. If the companies are obliged to pay a clean half-million, be sure they'll not fall in love with the fellow who brought that loss upon them. But—*can* you do all this, though?"

Old Pap Purkiss lifted a hand swiftly, signing caution, his deep-set eyes seeming like twin spots of fire as he silently rose to his feet and tiptoed across the bare room, to bend an ear against the closed door through which they had gained that apartment.

Not a sound came from beyond that barrier, and after a brief space of intent listening, the old fellow took it for granted that it was a false alarm, and turning, moved cautiously back to where the Insurance Special was waiting.

With curved palm shielding his lips, Old Pap Purkiss whispered in tones barely loud enough for Prince John to correctly catch:

"You just bet *I can*, boss! And you needn't take my word for it, neither, for I'll fix it so you can hear the duck say it himself!"

CHAPTER XX.

GETTING DOWN TO BEDROCK.

ALTHOUGH this was hardly what he expected to hear, and not exactly what he would have preferred hearing, Prince John was interested deeply enough to quickly utter:

"Go on, Pap; you're letting it out in precious little dribblets!"

"Well, I didn't want to knock you clean out of the ring, boss," with a low chuckle. "Now—the high-muck-a-muck of the whole business is going to meet the boys who did his dirty work, under this very roof, either to-night or to-morrow evening!"

Old Pap Purkiss drew back a couple of paces, rubbing hands together and grinning in fierce triumph as he watched the effect of this assertion upon the Insurance Detective.

That comely face was a blank, so far as betraying his real feelings was concerned, yet Prince John fairly tingled with grim joy as he found how surely all this was beginning to fay in with the theory he had formed, almost from the first.

Although he doubtless surmised something of the truth, that outward composure, almost indifference, served to partially calm the junk dealer, who resumed his former position on his heels, with back against those rough stones, nervously twisting his fingers as he spoke in low but very earnest tones:

"You're holding off, boss, because you reckon maybe I'm trying to rig a purchase onto you; but that's *wrong*—dead wrong, sir!"

"Of course; you've turned so honest, you know"

Old Pap Purkiss gave a wry grimace at that gently murmured jeer, but evidently realized that it could not help his cause to show anger or more positive resentment, just then.

"That's all right, Mr. Prince, and you'll give me credit in the end. It's straight goods I'm trying to sell you, and the price is mighty small—to *you*!"

"So you say, but I've known even reformed body-snatchers to make an error, at odd times. Still, I'm willing to hear the rest of it, Purkiss!"

"All right, boss, and I'll talk straight as a string on the stretch, too," declared the junk-dealer, leaning a bit further forward, his eyes glowing vividly, his face openly betraying his fierce passions.

"It's something I've never done before in all my life, boss, but *now* I'll blow the gaff, if only to play even with a dirty whelp who—who has done me too mighty much dirt, already, sir!"

"Give his name, can't you, Purkiss?"

"Dennis Delougherty, sir."

"A Pat-lander, eh?"

"Irish bred, sir, but you'd never think that way, only for his name. His folks came over the briny, but Denny was whelped on this side. *That* don't count, though, does it?"

"Maybe not. Go on, Pap."

"Well, I'd be lying, sir, as well as wasting time, if I tried to make you believe I'm a saint, and so—Delougherty caught me slipping, one time, years ago, and he's held a nasty club over my head ever since—curse him from top to toe!"

"And now you're trying to play even with Dennis, Pap? Quite sure this bit of a personal grudge isn't fooling *you* into trying to fool *me*, and at the same time sell Delougherty for heap sight more than he's really worth?"

It was an ugly suspicion, and hardly more welcome to the detective than it could have been to the crook! but it was a perfectly natural doubt, taking everything into consideration.

Still, that sharp query did not disturb the junk-dealer. He showed his yellow teeth in a brief grin, then spoke coolly enough:

"I'm giving you a fair chance to inspect the goods before you pay anything for them, Mr. Prince. I know you too mighty well to think of playing you crooked."

The detective looked at his watch, and then nodded his head.

"Time's mighty nigh up, Purkiss. Lively, now!"

"I'm only waiting for you to pledge me your word of honor, Mr. Prince, that you'll give me what I ask: no mercy for Dennis Delougherty, after I've showed full proof that *he's* the man who downed old Hillyard! Will you give it, sir?"

"Ay, and more than that, Purkiss" gravely said the detective in his turn. "I'll see that the real criminal pays full penalty, and if all this is brought about through your agency, I'll protect you against any old charge which may be brought up against you, through revenge. Is that satisfactory?"

"I'd be a hog to ask for anything more!" declared the old sinner, yet with a faint sigh and a covetous quiver of his claw-like fingers. "I *did* count on making a stake out of it, but—"

"Better trust to luck, Pap, and not try to crowd fortune too mighty hard," quietly warned the detective.

After a brief silence, during which the old junk-dealer seemed to be collecting his thoughts or arranging his facts, he spoke as follows:

"Well, sir, thanks to the grip Delougherty held on me, him and his gang has made my place a sort of headquarters for fixing up their little tricks, and for talking 'em all over afterward. So, you see, that's the way I came to catch on to this latest job."

"Meaning this Hillyard affair?"

"Just that, sir!"

"Then they took you into the job, of course, since you say you know all about it?"

"No, they didn't, sir, for I wouldn't have run any such long risks, and the boys knew as much. But I knew there was something bigger than common in the wind, and on the chance of getting an equal bulge on Denny you see, sir, I played spy over the gang, and took it all in."

Prince John gave a low, sneering laugh at this assertion, still further pointing his meaning with the words:

"They considered you too honest to be admitted to a share of either secret or the resulting spoils, of course, Purkiss?"

"Well, maybe that isn't just the right way to put it, but I'm telling you the naked truth when I say that I *had* to play spy, or go without," doggedly asserted the junk-dealer.

"And a gang of tough nuts who were gathered together to talk over and plan a killing which must stir up the entire city, were so careless as to leave an opening for a spy? And that spy a man who had good cause for hating and fearing the leader of the gang?"

Prince John felt that he was making a good and telling point in sticking a sharp pin right there; but instead of showing discomfiture or anger at the doubts so plainly indicated, Old Pap Purkiss gave a grin of grim triumph, rising to his feet and placing one hand upon a stone of the many composing that huge chimney.

"You think I'm making a mix of it, boss, but when I show you how I contrive to hold my end level—*like this*!"

Although he did not appear to be exerting any vast amount of power either by pressing or by pulling, a large portion of that rough masonry swung out of place, proving to be a cunningly arranged door of heavy oak plank, with an outside casing of rough stone.

When closed, even a critical inspection would fail to discover any joint in stone or mortar, while the whole contrivance was so heavy and so solidly constructed that one might ply hammer or sledge upon it without having suspicion aroused through a hollow echo.

In the dark opening thus disclosed Prince John could see a low wooden stool, and springing to his feet he stepped closer, strong interest awakened by this odd revelation.

"Does it begin to look a bit more likely, Mr. Prince?" asked Old Pap Purkiss, with curling lips and twinkling eyes as he pointed into that cunning hiding-place. "How do you like the looks of it anyway, sir?"

Before making answer, the Insurance Special moved still closer but never for an instant relaxing his guard, for he was by no means certain that another death-trap for himself did not lurk back of all this talk.

Still, he contrived to make as full an examination of the recess as possible by that uncertain light, and that without for a moment laying himself open to an attack by either Old Pap Purkiss or any as yet unseen foe.

There was nothing save that rude stool inside the hollow chimney, and over the base was laid an old rag carpet, doubtless the more surely to deaden any movement which one playing spy might be forced to make.

The junk-dealer made no motion, giving his guest time sufficient to make that inspection! but when Prince John drew back a bit, he swung the masked door silently shut, chuckling a bit as he tapped those rough stones with a hand, then saying:

"Find the joint if you can, Mr. Prince! And, though you saw me both open and close the door, I'll give you my head as a football if you'll show me how the trick is turned!"

"It's a neat bit of work, Purkiss," coolly said the detective, "but doesn't it say mighty little in favor of one who has turned so wholly honest? Eh, old man?"

"That's all right, sir, and I'm not kicking against your little jokes," grimly chuckled the junk-dealer. "What I'm most interested in right now, is to prove to you that I'm playing you white; that I'm giving you a dead square deal, for which I only ask one thing."

"A hemp necktie for your dear friend, Dennis Delougherty, is it?"

"Just *that*, sir! And to make it perfectly clear how I can give you the proof I say—just step inside here, please!"

As he spoke, Purkiss swung that masked door open again, motioning in keeping with his words; but Prince John, seemed in no great haste to accept that invitation.

True, he could not see where there could be a snare hidden, nor did he actually believe that Old Pap Purkiss would dare play him false in that style; still it was a proven

fact that he had once nearly lost his life at the hands of thugs who, by the junk-dealer's own admission, held forth under that very roof.

"Shall I go in first, boss?" asked Old Pap Purkiss, with the ghost of a smile, as though he read that hesitation correctly. "I want to make it all dead clear to you, sir, and that can't be done easy without your stepping inside this snug little chamber of my own invention."

Prince John was not the man to make two bites of a mouthful, and at once stepping forward, drawing his gun as he did so, coldly said:

"All right, my dear fellow. I'm willing to give you all the show you can find cheek to ask for, only—"

He closed left hand on an arm of the junk-dealer, and brought his right around until the muzzle of that revolver touched his ribs beneath those loose garments.

"What do you mean, man, dear?" huskily gasped the old sinner, shrinking from that contact. "I'm playing clean white, and—"

"And I'm simply making sure that you keep along that same honest level, my dear fellow," coolly cut in the Insurance Special. "Come on, Pap; I'm burning up with curiosity, don't you see it?"

Purkiss rallied quickly enough, and stepping inside that cunningly contrived retreat, closely accompanied by the detective, he caused the stone-faced door to swing silently shut behind them, leaving all in utter darkness.

"Don't make any mistake, Old Stiff, or you'll go up the flume like a dead leaf caught in a whirligust!" sternly whispered Prince John, and the muzzle of his gun bored deeper between those ribs!

CHAPTER XXI.

SQUARE DEAL OR CROOKED: WHICH?

"Don't shoot without fair cause, and I ain't a-kicking, boss," muttered the junk-dealer, making no effort to either evade grasp or weapon. "Now, I've got to touch the trigger for—*this* way, sir!"

By a motion of his free member, Old Pap Purkiss caused three small points of light to appear directly in front of them as they then stood, and Prince John divined the truth even before the old man added:

"Stoop, boss, like ye was squatting on the stool, at ease. *This* is my way of playing even with the gang when they try to be too mighty smart: see?"

By stooping, with eye passing from one to another of those little apertures, Prince John *did* see: an ordinary sized room, supplied with rude table and chairs, now without a living occupant; for, by taking the several loopholes in turn, he could inspect almost the whole of that apartment.

Waiting until the Insurance Special lifted his head as though satisfied with his inspection, Old Pap Purkiss closed those peep-holes, with a low, grim chuckle as he caused the masked door to open behind them.

"That's the way the old thing works, you see, boss," was his remark as the detective backed out of that cunningly contrived den. "It's through these weenty worm-holes that I take my look, and listen to what the merry lads are chinning over, too. And now—shall I take you to that same room, sir, so you can satisfy yourself that while you can see from in yonder, nobody can smoke the trick from the other side?"

Prince John shook his head in negation, for he was fairly well satisfied on that point. If yonder room was the place where the Frisco thugs met to form their nefarious plans, be sure so cunning a knave as Pap Purkiss would take care to hide from their knowledge the secret of such an admirable place for playing spy and eavesdropper.

"You're mighty right, boss!" grinningly cackled the junkman, reading that reflection as by magic. "The gang'd slit my weasand too terrible sudden if they so much as guessed at that pretty little secret!"

"I'm not caring how often you play the gang crooked, Pap, but this much is Gospel: try any of your slippery tricks on me, and I'll wipe you out with as little mercy as we show a mad-dog!" grimly warned Prince John, putting up his pistol, now that they were in the room.

"Is it likely I would, sir?"

"I hardly think it, myself, Purkiss; still, fair warning can do no harm, and I'll balance it with this: Play me fair, and I'll give you a dead square deal in exchange."

"And you'll make sure of Delougherty, even if all the rest of the gang goes free?" with fierce eagerness.

"If you can show that Delougherty had a hand in the killing of Hilary Hillyard, be sure I'll freeze fast to him; but—*can* you do that much, Purkiss?"

"Now we're getting down to hard-pan, boss!" declared the junk-dealer, once more squatting on his heels in front of the detective, fingers twisting, eyes glowing like burning coals. "Won't it be evidence enough if you hear Denny take the bloody job onto himself, then?"

"Can you promise that he'll do that, Pap?"

"Well, boss, if he don't convict himself it'll be mighty funny!" declared the old sinner, now seeming at ease with himself and all the world save that one dangerous accomplice. "How is it to be? Just like this!"

"I'm looking for Delougherty and the others to meet here this evening, or to-morrow night at the very latest, on business. Denny will be on deck, I know, and unless I'm on the wrong scent, so will the party who put up the job on old Hillyard."

"The one who hired his removal, do you mean?"

"Just that, sir!"

"Who is this party, Purkiss?"

"Now you've got me foul, boss! He was only here the once, and then I missed getting his full measure; but of one thing I'm mighty nigh sure, and that is the cops have juggled the wrong party!"

Prince John pulled his mustache thoughtfully, eyes lowered and jaws squared, rapidly running the points over in his mind.

So far Old Pap Purkiss seemed to be playing his cards straight and above-board; but was there treachery lying back of all this?

"My pay can't come until after you've satisfied yourself it's fairly due, Mr. Prince," quietly reminded the old junk-dealer. "And then, too, Delougherty was one of the ducks who tried to do you up, last night!"

"What was *that* for, anyway, Pap?"

"Because they reckoned you were taking up this job, sir," came the prompt response. "Sam told me as much, yesterday, and that's why it scared me, a bit ago, when I saw 'twas you taking a look in at my windows."

This plausibly cleared up one dark point, and helped convince the Insurance Special that, on this occasion at least the old sinner was acting on the square.

"To-night, or to-morrow, you say?" thoughtfully mused Prince. "How comes it that you're a little mixed on that score, Purkiss?"

"Depends on the high-roller, you see, sir; whether or no he can best get 'round to-night or the next evening. If it was later in the day, I might be able to tell you for sure, but now—I say, boss!"

"Say it, Pap."

"You say it's a regular bargain as to Denny, and I'll promise to let you know in good time just when the meeting is to come off. I *could* turn up Delougherty to you this night, of course, but you'd rather make a double shot of it, I reckon?"

"And so bag both tool and employer? Bet your sweet life, Old Stiff!"

"That's the way I'd rather have it arranged, boss, my own self; for it's likely they'll do heap plainer talking if both are together, and I don't want it to turn out a fizzle, far's Delougherty's concerned."

"Well?"

"Well, what's the matter with this, boss? I'll learn for sure when the meeting is to hold, and let you know in good time. If it's to be this evening, I'll send you word by a trusty hand, if you'll tell me where it'll be sure to find you."

"I'll wait at my room," said Prince, producing a hotel card and giving it to the junk-dealer. "Send me this card, with the one word '*yes*' written upon the back, and I'll know the rendezvous is to be kept to-night. Understand?"

"Bet your life! And if you don't get this card back again, sir, you can know something's happened to prevent the meeting."

"And if it is to be the next night?"

Old Pap Purkiss bent his frowzy head for a few seconds, thoughtfully tugging at his tangled beard; but then he spoke quickly enough:

"If you don't get word at your hotel from me before noon, sir, take another stroll over this way, and keep an eye on my place. If the meeting is fixed for *that* night, there'll be a white rag showing at the window in my west gable."

"And if *not* for that night?"

"Well, if there's any change, further on, or if anything's turned up to make it best for us to have another talk, sir, I'll show a *red* rag at that same window. If you see the color, just lazy around outside until I make a sign that all's clear; then come in here."

"And in case there should be no rag at all fluttering?"

"Go back and wait for a message from me."

Prince John laughed half-sneeringly at this, and said:

"Your code's about as long as the moral law, Old Stiff! Going by it a body would fancy you were plotting for a crown, or for millions, at the very lowest figure!"

"That's all right, boss," with a dogged stolidity. "This is going to be a hanging matter for anyway *one* party, and if the part I'm offering to play should ever get wind—good by Pap!"

"You mean that the gang would go for you?"

"I mean it'd be sure death to me if Denny Delougherty even dreamed that I was selling him out! You ought to see so much, Mr. Prince?"

"Probably I will when I take time to think it all over, Pap," admitted the detective, rising again from his seat, like one who feels pretty much everything has been said.

"And you'll give me a dead square deal for my part, sir?" half-doubtingly asked the junk-dealer as he moved slowly toward the door by means of which they had entered that room.

"Just as square as you give me, Purkiss, and a man who'd ask anything better or fairer than that, ought to wear bristles in place of clothes! Now, reckon I'll take a walk, old fellow!"

"Don't forget to be at the hotel, please," reminded the junk-dealer as he led the way from room to narrow passage, into the kitchen, where he signed for the detective to wait until he could make sure the coast was entirely clear in front of the house.

While briefly waiting there, Prince John was busy thinking, trying to make sure whether this was a really square deal, or but another cunningly laid trap for his discomfiture, if not for his death.

Those serious doubts were by no means settled when Old Pap Purkiss came back with word that all was correct, and then, with a parting caution on either side, the Insurance Special left the place where he had gleaned so much that was surprising, so much that was of vast importance—provided always if it was true!

All the way to his hotel Prince John was pondering that point: was Purkiss really playing fair, or was it a crooked deal? And long after he was seated in his chamber, these same doubts were being debated.

Then, taking from his bosom a small parcel, slowly removing the wrappings until a curious relic was laid bare, the detective muttered, lowly:

"If he's giving me a dead square deal, where goes my theory of—*this*?" at the same time holding up that relic.

It was a human finger, severed close to the hand!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CRIPPLED FINGER.

TURNING so as to let a more favorable light fall upon that grim relic, Prince John sat gazing fixedly upon the trophy which he seemed to prize so highly, judging from the manner in which it was kept wrapped up in tin-foil, in oiled silk, and then hidden close to his heart in an inner and secret pocket made by his own fingers for that especial purpose.

A human finger!

That this relic had undoubtedly been,

although now it called for more than a casual glance to make its identity clear.

For one thing, fire had been at work upon it, and in addition to fairly cooking the flesh, had twisted the member to a sharp angle.

For several minutes the detective inspected that gruesome clue to a great crime, turning the stolen finger over and over, viewing it from all points, even trying to straighten that crook; but in vain.

Then, wrapping the finger up as before, and placing it in hiding once more, Prince John sat in brooding silence, eyes fixed but seeing naught, fingers tugging at his heavy mustaches as though he hoped thus to quicken his brooding wits.

Presently the Insurance Special flung off that burden of doubt, and springing to his feet, took up his hat and left his chamber, passing down-stairs and out upon the busy street.

Hurrying along like one who had important business on hand and but a limited time in which to complete the work, Prince John soon left the street for a tall, handsome office-block, where he was quickly in front of a gilt-lettered glass door on the second floor.

"A streak of good luck for once, anyway!" he bluntly declared, as he caught sight of a tall, portly shape on opening the door. "More than glad to find you in, and—no patients on deck, doctor?"

"Glad to see you, Mr. Prince; come in, please," said Wesley Morgantrude, M. D., rising from his office chair with hand reaching out as supplementary welcome. "For your sake, though, I trust it is not as a patient that you make me this call?"

"If not as a patient, I may possibly try your patience before the end, doctor," chuckled the detective, glancing keenly around the room. "May I ask a strictly private audience, sir?"

Something in his face, even more than in his words or tone, impressed the doctor, and briskly stepping to the door, he turned the key, then came back to open another door, leading into a private chamber.

"In here, please, Mr. Prince."

Then, snugly behind closed doors, the Insurance Special made known the purpose of his hurried visit.

"Of course it's hardly necessary in your case, doctor, but to make everything smooth to start with, please give me your word to consider all this as strictly confidential, and to be mentioned to none other, without my full permission. Will you do that, sir?"

"Is it really necessary, Mr. Prince?" gravely asked the other.

"I think so, yes: It's a professional secret I'm asking you to share with me in keeping, Morgantrude. Can't you trust me that far?"

"I can, and do. You have my word of honor, Mr. Prince."

The detective gave hearty thanks, then drawing a small parcel from an inner pocket, he began removing its wrappings, speaking rapidly while so doing:

"I've got a little something here, doctor, on which I need your professional opinion. Of course I've got my own ideas concerning it, which I'll cheerfully share with you; but before that I wish—What can you tell me about that, please?"

Taking off the tin-foil, Prince John placed that grim relic in the palm which Dr. Morgantrude extended for its reception.

A slight wave of color came over that massive face, but the finger was examined in silence, and no comment made or surprise expressed as to its condition.

"It is a human finger: the fourth, or, as it is commonly termed, the 'little finger,' and belonged to the left hand," gravely decided the physician. "At some time in the past, the bone has been badly fractured, and the finger ever since left a cripple."

"Because of that fracture, doctor?"

"That was the beginning, sir, past doubt. As you see, the joint has ossified—what you call 'a stiff joint'—and that was the result of leaving the hurt uncared-for by a competent physician, or through the fracture being wrongly set!"

"You are sure that this is the right solution, doctor?"

"I am giving the opinion you asked, Mr. Prince, as a professional man," coldly answered

Morgantrude, holding forth the crippled finger.

"Wait a bit, please, doctor. You see that the finger has been burnt; couldn't that crook have come from fire contracting the sinews?"

"No, sir. The joint is stiff. You might break, but you could never bend that finger straight. Fire might shrivel the flesh and curl the tendons, but it could never do this."

There was a brief silence, during which Prince John took back the fire-marked finger, thoughtfully weighing it in his open palm as he sat opposite the examining physician, on whose face rested a grave, troubled expression like one who anticipates a far from agreeable revelation.

Glancing from crippled finger to that face, the Insurance Special caught that uneasy look, and quickly asked:

"Doctor, if you were examining an applicant for life insurance, would or could you overlook such a mark as this?"

"Without mentioning it, do you mean, sir?"

"As a mark of identity, of course."

"No, sir. Even if the applicant should make no mention of the deformity, I neither could nor would overlook such a fact. Not that the fact of having a crippled finger would make any difference in my report, all else being favorable, but as furnishing a possible means of identification in case of a death-claim, I certainly would record that fact."

"I know that is the rule for all examining physicians to follow, and I know, too, that you are accounted one if not the most accurate and reliable examiner we have on the Slope—"

"I make no such claims, Mr. Prince."

"No such claim is needed on your part, doctor, since the fact is so well known," quickly added the detective, with a bright smile. "But, as I was about to say: If the applicant was at all sensitive on that point, and tried to conceal the fact of his having a crippled finger, might it not be possible for even a careful, conscientious examiner to overlook such a minor fact?"

"Possible, of course, but hardly probable," answered Morgantrude, rising to procure the private note-book which he had once before exhibited to those keenly interested eyes, opening it and pointing out a particular page, headed with the boldly written name of "Adolf Mohler."

"This is at least partial proof, Mr. Prince, as you can see for yourself by running over the items under this heading. See—crippled finger, left hand, second joint, caused by—"

Dr. Morgantrude broke off with an abrupt start, giving a half smothered ejaculation as he stared at the face of the detective.

"Prince John was smiling gravely, a curious glitter in his eyes as they met that wondering, almost frightened look.

"Looks rather odd, don't you reckon, doctor?" he asked, in low, slow tones. "A crippled finger—a crippled little finger! And on the left hand! And that imperfection consisting of a stiff joint, which might in both cases been caused by the same—or was that mark of identity in the case of Adolf Mohler caused by the same carelessness, doctor?"

When he began, Prince John had no intention of saying so much, or of talking so long; but the examining physician seemed like one fallen under a spell too great for his will power to break.

He stared with lower jaw drooping so far as to part his full lips, and when his amazed gaze did shift, it was only to go from face to finger, that crippled member then holding his eyes as though by a charm.

When the Insurance Special ceased his half mocking speech, that cessation of sound served to effect what the words themselves had been unable to do: Dr. Morgantrude gave a start, catching his suspended breath with an audible gasp, brushing a far from steady hand across his face as though he felt the need of some such action to clear the mists from his eyes, the cobwebs from his brain.

"Let me see that—again!" he spoke, taking the crippled finger from the man who held it in charge, holding it where the light fell most favorably upon it, slowly and closely scrutinizing the grim trophy.

"The same hand—the same joint of the same finger!" Morgantrude muttered, hardly conscious of putting his muddled thoughts into audible words, just then "What does it all mean? Surely—I say, Prince!"

"Waiting on your pleasure, doctor," came the prompt reply.

"Where did you get this finger, then?"

"This is strictly between you and me, doctor?" asked the Insurance Detective, in turn. "Whatever confession I may make to you, now and here, is sacred from all outsiders as though told to a priest in his confessional?"

"I've passed my word to that effect, sir," stiffly said the physician, drawing back a little at that speech. "If you doubt my—"

"Don't you think it for a moment, doctor!" swiftly cut in John Prince, although there was still a half malicious twinkle in his bright eyes as he added: "Still, when a fellow gets to my age, he naturally hates to own himself a thief, without making sure that ugly secret will spread no further."

"I don't understand, sir," frowningly said Morgantrude. "I simply asked where you procured this crippled finger, and you—"

"Confess that I stole it," again cut in Prince John. "I did just that, doctor: while the coroner's jury were forming their verdict, I stole that finger from the left hand of the corpse, above-stairs!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SPECIAL DETECTIVE'S SENSATION.

"IMPOSSIBLE!"

"But true."

Dr. Morgantrude looked like a man absolutely dumfounded, eyes staring in wide amazement, his chin falling until his lips came apart for a fair exhibition of ivory.

This, taken in contrast with his usual dignified demeanor, proved comical enough to draw a smile to the face of the Insurance Detective, although his own earnestness was far too great for anything like ordinary mirth to make itself felt.

"Impossible, sir!" repeated the examining physician, his suspended breath issuing like a miniature explosion. "I cannot—there is some tremendous error in all this, I tell you, sir!"

"Shall I kiss the book, doctor?" asked Prince John. "Do I look like a fellow who would brand himself as a thief, just for the fun of it?"

"But—from the body of Hilary Hillyard! I cannot believe that is true, even on your solemn word, Mr. Prince!"

That faint smile came back to the strong face of the Special Detective, and like one who feels he has an unanswerable argument in hand, his live finger gently tapped that dead member as it lay upon his left palm.

Dr. Morgantrude was beginning to willy from that surprise, and now he was not enough of brain to measure his words before giving them utterance.

Resuming the seat out of which he had sprung in his amazement, he first made use of his handkerchief, then slowly, almost doggedly shook his head in answer to that keen, inquiring gaze of the detective.

"You may say and do what you please, Prince John, but I know what I do know, and that is this: Hilary Hillyard never wore a finger which had been crippled after that fashion!"

That faint smile faded entirely away during that positive statement, and the Special Detective was sober enough when it came his turn to speak.

"Before we go any further with this affair, doctor, let me tell you just how it happened that I thought it worth while to take so much trouble, if not run so much risk."

"You know how it happened that I was on the spot among the first of the outsiders, of course, and you know that, thanks to Chief Paulette, I was given wider latitude than is generally accorded an insurance man."

"I understand all that, sir, but—"

"I'm working round to that, doctor, and I'll make quicker time if you let me take my own trail," quickly uttered Prince John.

"Excuse me, sir!"

"Don't mention it, doctor! And so it happened, then, that I not only had plenty of

time for examining the body, but did so before its attitude had been changed through others handling the remains.

"You know that one means of identification was that seal ring? It was inspecting this, that made me take hold of the left hand, to see if it carried anything of the sort; and my doing that, first showed me the body had one crippled finger!"

Dr. Morgantrude opened his lips to speak, but Prince John swiftly lifted a hand, and the words were held back.

"Hear me through, first, please, then you can say what strikes you so solid, doctor," the detective said, half-apologetically. "May I?"

"Go on, sir."

"Naturally enough, then, I was on the point of making some remark about the finger, as being a certain clue to the identification; but just then Coroner Porson found the hatchet which had been used to deal that heavy blow, and somehow the other fact slipped my mind."

"Then, if you remember, I had that little talk with you and Kavanaugh about Hillyard and his insurance, and when I found that no mention had been made in his application, under its proper head, of that deformed finger—"

"Because Hilary Hillyard had no such deformity, sir!"

"So you assured me, then, doctor, and that positive statement first made me think of turning thief," coolly added the detective, eyes turning upon that stolen finger once more, as it now rested upon the table at which the two men were seated.

"Still, I wanted to make dead sure that it was worth the trouble, not to mention the risk; and for that reason I waited patiently until all evidence was in, and the coroner was about to deliver his charge to the jury."

"As you know, doctor, a strong point was made of identifying the remains as those of Hilary Hillyard, but among all those who testified to that effect, *not one alluded to a crippled finger!* And so—well, that fact was all I needed to determine my course of action, and while Porson was talking, I was acting!"

"Go on! You mean?"

"That I went up-stairs to the chamber where the corpse was waiting for the undertakers, and with a pair of strong nippers which I had supplied myself with for that very purpose, *I cut off that crippled finger!*"

"From the body which we—which I identified as that of Hilary Hillyard?" slowly, almost harshly demanded the examining physician.

"From the body which you conscientiously swore was that of Hilary Hillyard, on whose life or death depended a cool half-million of dollars—precisely so, Dr. Morgantrude!"

The medical man sat in silence for the space of a full minute, gazing with almost painful intensity into that face opposite him. But John Prince never flinched an atom, for he knew he was in the right, and he felt fully prepared to hold his own against all odds.

At the end of that period, Dr. Morgantrude drew a long, audible breath then permitted his strained muscles to relax in a measure, speaking in low, even tones:

"Mr. Prince, of course I am bound to give your strange assertion full credence, although from almost any other lips I would brand that statement as an infernal lie!"

"Thank you, for so much, anyway, doctor," with a faint smile; but the physician paid that no heed, adding in the same deliberate tones:

"For my part, Mr. Prince, I will say just this: I knew Hilary Hillyard in life, not only as a patient, but as a personal friend as well. I knew him intimately for nearly a dozen years, and scores of times he has been my home guest, even as I have been his."

"That surely ought to make you pretty well acquainted with the gentleman, doctor," quietly observed Prince John as Morgantrude paused to catch his breath, or to fix in mind his climax.

"It surely *did*, sir! And hence I say to you now, what I have said before: Hilary Hillyard never had a crippled finger like that, and if you cut it from the left hand of the body which I identified the other day as that of my old friend, then—there is some infernal trickery going on, and that corpse is a fraud!"

This was a climax, sure enough! But be-

fore the now strongly excited physician could follow up his speech, Prince John interposed, saying in grave tones:

"If fraud, doctor, remember there's another man who would like to have a finger in the pie. Will you go with me to look up Horace Kavanaugh, Morgantrude?"

The doctor immediately sprung to his feet, and snatching up his hat but forgetting his gold-headed cane (something which he had not done for many a busy year, and which affords some dim idea as to how terribly he was worked up over this strange sensation), he unlocked his office door and hurried down to the street in company with the detective.

Prince John beckoned to a slowly passing hack, not so much because a few minutes won or lost were of such vast importance, but he shrewdly reasoned that Dr. Morgantrude would require seclusion for composure, and that it would be well worth the fare to avoid attracting attention on the streets.

Five minutes more took them to the building in which Horace Kavanaugh had an office, and dismissing the hack, the two men quickly ascended to the floor where they expected to find the insurance agent.

Kavanaugh was in, and gave them a cordial greeting, although back of that warmth lay a poorly veiled uneasiness, as though the agent had come to couple their faces with bad news, to say the very least.

Prince John had laid out his course of action so thoroughly that he was at no loss for words, and tersely but clearly placed his new sensation before the amazed agent, who seemed fairly dumfounded at first.

But then, as he caught an inkling of the significant truth, chains fell away from his tongue, and he burst forth in a wild tirade, the main point of which was that 'twas all a vile trick to cheat the insurance company out of their hard-earned thousands!

"It's a fraud then, faith! It's all an infernal plot to put me in a hole, sure! And then—oh, the bloody devils! Sure, then, and I'll—"

"Button lip for a bit, Kavanaugh," bluntly said the Special. "You want to go easy until we're a little surer of our ground, my pretty man."

"But, man, dear, isn't it dead sure that yonder *couldn't* have been our man? Wouldn't the doctor know it—and you *do* know it, Morgantrude?"

"I know that Hilary Hillyard never had a finger on either hand which had been crippled like this one," gravely answered the examining physician.

"Of course, doctor, but all the same I repeat: go easy, until we're dead sure of our footing. If that corpse was not the remains of Hilary Hillyard, whose was it?"

Only a blank stare came in answer to this question, and after waiting a brief space, Prince John spoke again:

"What ever became of the Adolf Mohler you insured, Kavanaugh?"

With a sharp cry the insurance agent sprung to his feet.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PRINCE JOHN DISCOUNTS DEATH.

HORACE KAVANAUGH clapped both hands over his mouth as though by no less heroic means could he refrain from bursting into a regular Irish "hurroo;" but then, while the Insurance Detective leaned back in his chair, smiling grimly, the excited agent spoke out, hoarsely:

"Be the holies, and *that's* it, gentlemen! They've stolen *Mohler's* corpse and played it off on us for that of *Hillyard*, be gonies!"

Dr. Morgantrude gave a start and a cry but Prince John said nothing just then, although his gleaming eyes and triumphant face told that he was not the least confident of the trio that he had hit upon the correct solution of that grim riddle.

Excess of emotion quickly overcame the excitable Irishman, and when he dizzily sunk back into his seat, gasping for breath and fanning his heated brows, the detective gravely spoke out.

"Don't forget, gentlemen, that there's something more to be done than merely shouting victory. For one thing, remember that we've handicapped ourselves heavily by publicly acknowledging that Hilary Hill-

yard *is* dead, and that his body was granted burial by us."

"Sure, then, can't we swally our words, darlint?" spluttered Kavanaugh, reverting in part to the brogue of his earlier days.

"There's a cool half-million at stake, remember, and if this is in honest truth a put-up job to cheat the companies, why, we can count on having to fight for every inch of ground before winning it!"

"Now, about this Adolf Mohler: what sort of fellow was he? I mean, how would he compare with Hillyard as to size and general dimensions?"

Thanks to the private record which the examining physician habitually carried with him, the comparison was quickly made. And, as Prince John had carefully reasoned out since first striking the clue of that crippled finger, the record showed that Adolf Mohler was of almost precisely the same build and frame-work as Hilary Hillyard.

"The main difference lies in complexion and hair," commented the examining physician. "Mohler was a German blonde, while Hillyard was dark as a Spaniard; but, of course, the fire would change all that! And Mohler was some twenty pounds heavier than Hillyard, owing to his beer-drinking habits, no doubt."

Prince John listened intently, and fixed upon that unconscious admission, to say:

"Then Adolf Mohler is dead, doctor?"

"Yes. He died of heart disease—mitral insufficiency, to be more exact—and was buried just four days before this affair of Hillyard's," slowly, almost reluctantly answered Morgantrude.

Prince John saw this reluctance, and remembering how the doctor had claimed Hilary Hillyard as his personal friend, easily enough interpreted that disinclination to speak further along those lines.

Still, where such a large sum of money hung in the balance, to be lost or won through bringing to light what now promised to prove one of the most daring and original impositions of the year, Prince John felt that personal feeling had no right to cut any figure in the case.

"I can understand how you find it difficult to bear evidence, doctor," he said, seriously, reaching out a hand to touch Morgantrude's arm. "But there is another duty you owe, which comes in advance of that due to mere friendship."

The examining physician stirred uneasily under this grave if veiled rebuke, then spoke in turn:

"I'll perform my duty without fear or favor, Mr. Prince, but if I understand your words aright, you imply that my friendship for Hilary Hillyard may lead me to betray the insurance companies?"

"Not for a moment, doctor! Don't you think that for an instant!"

"I'm glad to hear you say as much, sir, and now—listen, please. I begin to believe there *has* been a daring fraud palmed off on us all, but I differ with you in thinking that Hilary Hillyard had ought to do with that scheme to defraud the insurance companies."

"If not, where is he, doctor? Since that body could not be his, owing to its having a crippled finger, what has become of him?"

"That is more than I can explain, Mr. Prince, but I repeat: when the whole truth comes to light, Hilary Hillyard will stand forth before all the world as an honest man!" firmly declared the physician.

Horace Kavanaugh gave a snort of disbelief, but Prince John gravely accepted that faith.

"I sincerely hope you may prove to be in the right of it, doctor, and that's one more reason why you want to do all you can to clear away all doubts as to the whole truth in this case."

"Now, to go back: since Adolf Mohler is dead and buried, do you deem it possible that matters could have been so arranged as to have his body mistaken for that of Hilary Hillyard?"

"It might, yes. The main difficulty would lie in securing the body and placing it in that chamber. After that—with Hillyard out of the way—the fire would blot out all minor discrepancies."

"Then you admit that such a trick *might* have been played?"

"Yes, and I feel positively sure that just

such a bold trick *was* played off on us all!" unhesitatingly declared the examining physician.

"Ah-ha, the divils!" exploded Kavanaugh, unable longer to contain himself. "Thrick for thrick, and it'll be *us* that's laughing while *they* do be dancing on nothing, sure!"

"Go easy, Horace," curtly cautioned the detective, with a grim smile playing over his face. "Wait until fancies have been turned into facts before you whoop. As for me, I greatly prefer to do my crowing after I know for certain the woods are left behind."

"But, man, dear! That crippled finger is proof enough to—"

"Proof enough to justify us in looking further, Kavanaugh, but lacking a vast deal of being sufficient to save your companies that half-million."

Dr. Morgantrude spoke up, gravely:

"It seems to me, gentlemen, that our first step ought to be making sure that the body of Adolf Mohler has been resurrected. If not—"

"But haven't we all agreed that it *has* been, faith?" almost indignantly cried the insurance agent. "Don't that finger tell as much? And didn't Prince John—the Saints be good to him, if he *is* a heretic!"

Again the detective interposed, spoiling the rest of that enthusiastic speech, and leaving that sentence incomplete forever.

"I'll agree with you so far, doctor," Prince said, when the wildly wrought-up Irishman had fairly subsided. "One of, if not our very first steps should be to learn whether the body of Adolf Mohler is still resting in the grave, where it was originally deposited. If not—"

"Dollars to cints that we don't find it there, thin! I was niver surer in all my life av annything—good Lord, man! Can't I aven open the two lips av me, thin?"

Prince John dropped the hand he had lifted in purely mischievous warning, as was proven by his own light words:

"I don't care to take you, Kavanaugh, for I'd hate to win, and it's against my principles to bet to lose. Now—let's get down to solid business, gentlemen!"

Kavanaugh closed his jaws with a click, and Dr. Morgantrude looked expectant. But when Prince John spoke next, it was along a different line from the one they naturally expected.

"You know how narrowly I escaped getting done up for all time, last night, gentlemen? Well, what has happened once is mighty liable to happen twice, and so—lest I run up against another snag, let me at least leave *this* floor of my house in order. Pen, paper and ink, please, Kavanaugh!"

As he spoke, Prince John turned to the desk where those articles were handy, and where they could be handled to the best advantage.

"Is it a will ye're thinking of making, man, dear?" curiously asked the insurance agent, as he placed paper before the detective.

"Hardly that, Horace," with a low laugh as he squared himself for work. "What I intend doing just now, is to plainly set down the whole facts—so far as known, that is—of this crippled finger. I mean to state just where it came from, and my reasons for taking possession of it after such a sneaking fashion. Understand?"

"That part is plain enough, Prince, but what makes you think—"

"How *can* I think, when you keep blowing your blessed bazoo right in my best ear, Mr. Kavanaugh?" reproachfully demanded the detective looking up from the sheet of paper at the top of which he had already noted down the day and the hour.

With a dry grimace the insurance agent fell back, smothering his mingled curiosity and excitement over that wonderful discovery as best he might during that period of enforced waiting.

In short, crisp sentences Prince John set down the main facts concerning that crippled finger, and when fully satisfied that he had omitted no essential portion of the affair, he asked the other gentlemen to first read the statement, and then add their signatures as witnesses.

When all this was accomplished, the detective folded the paper, put it into an envelope which he sealed and upon the back of

which he wrote the name of Virgo Paulette, Chief of Police.

Then Horace Kavanaugh could contain himself no longer, demanding:

"And what the deuce is in the wind, *now*, I dunno, Prince? By the likes av *that*, sure, a body'd be afther thinking—what the ould bye *is* it we *want* to be thinking, then, man, dear?"

The Insurance Detective was laughing silently in that reddened, excited face, for it was with nearly a whine that those final words came, instead of those which had shaped themselves.

"Well, gentlemen," said Prince John, growing grave again. "I'm not so sure, but if I don't turn up here in the morning, give this to Paulette, and ask him to take charge of my effects, for—I'll be a dead man!"

As he spoke, he handed that sealed envelope to Horace Kavanaugh.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNREWARDED VIGIL.

THERE was no room for doubting his earnestness, now, and Horace Kavanaugh accepted that charge very much as he might have received the last wishes of a dying friend.

Though less excitable, and therefore less impressible, Wesley Morgantrude likewise felt the influence of that change, and with a slightly-troubled expression coming into his own face, he ventured:

"There's more lying back of this than you have told us, Mr. Prince. Is it a secret too important for us to know, then?"

"No secret at all, my dear sir," frankly declared the Insurance Detective, smiling brightly, looking like a man who has flung off a heavy load of care, if not of sore trouble. "I'm merely guarding against accidents, you understand?"

"Accidents on purpose, begad!" blurted out Kavanaugh.

"You have reasons for fearing for your life, then, Mr. Prince?"

The detective hesitated briefly, like one who is inwardly debating whether or no it is advisable to confess all; but he knew he was in the presence of true and trusty friends, and that he in a measure owed them just such a candid explanation as this.

Again reminding them of his narrow escape from assassination only the night before, Prince John gave his reasons for thinking that attempt upon his life was made by those interested in this Nob Hill tragedy.

"It's part of my bad luck that people haven't had time to forget my mixing up in that fire-bug case, you understand," he added, grimly. "And so, when it looked as though I was taking a hand in this affair, I reckon those deepest in the mire thought I'd better be coaxed off the track."

"Unless it was the work of some of the friends of these same fire-bugs," suggested Dr. Morgantrude.

"Either way," admitted the detective. "To tell the truth, in my desire to catch hold of a positive clue to the trick, I've been thrusting temptation in the way of possible sinners, by playing the part of a detective after the conventional stage sleuth; dark, gloomy, mysterious, prowling hither and yon, using such exaggerated caution as would attract rather than escape notice."

"And you think that *did* attract attention, then?"

"To my sorrow!" with a wry grimace as he gingerly touched his sore pate. "But to my gain, as well, since it nearly assured me that I was on the correct scent, after all!"

"That's all mighty nice talking, faith, but there's something else I'd h'ape sight rather be afther, d'ye mind, now?" cut in Horace Kavanaugh. "When is it we're to go afther that corpse, then, gentlemen?"

"The less time lost the wiser, I imagine," said Dr. Morgantrude.

Prince John lifted a hand, and as both pair of eyes turned his way inquiringly, he spoke, gravely enough:

"I'll have to ask you to wait a bit longer, gentlemen, for I've got something else on the docket that may interfere with your wishes. You will humor me, and wait, of course?"

"For how long, man, dear?"

The detective paused for brief thought, then made answer:

"I can tell you better by—say nine o'clock, this evening. At that hour, then, if you will call for me at my hotel, I'll be able to answer you more definitely. Will that serve?"

There could be but one answer to this, and assent was given, although Horace Kavanaugh plainly chafed against the necessary delay.

After a few words more, mainly touching upon the arrangements which would have to be made before they could hope to put their suspicions to the thorough test, the conference broke up, and parting from the two gentlemen whom he had so greatly surprised that day, Prince John hastened back to his hotel, where his first care was to learn if letter, note or message of any description had been left at the office for him.

Disappointed in this respect, the Insurance Special left word with the clerk that he intended going to his room, where he would be found in case any word or article was brought to the hotel for him, then sought his chamber, partly to begin his vigil, partly to complete the precautions which he had begun while at Kavanaugh's office.

He had no doubt as to the cause for that desperate assault in which the thug, Sam Pitkin, had lost his life. He firmly believed their purpose was to remove him, before he brought ruin upon the bold schemes of the Nob Hill conspirators, even as he had, only a few short weeks before, carried confusion to the plans and into the ranks of the Frisco Firebugs.

Acting on this belief, then, Prince John had already made it nearly certain that Old Pap Purkiss was more or less intimately concerned in that affair, if nothing more than affording a rendezvous where the evil gang could meet to shape their plans and settle upon the details.

Looking back still further, when the detective first made morally certain that Hilary Hillyard had no such crippled finger as the dead man bore upon his left hand, the theory which at once suggested itself is plain; a body had been substituted for that of the insured, and as it was hardly possible that the plotters would go so far as to commit murder in order to obtain what could so much more easily—and cheaply—be stolen from the nearest graveyard, this suggested body-snatchers.

That accounted for his strong if veiled interest in Old Pap Purkiss, whom he had known in past years as "Old Stiff," a notorious ghoul of the graveyard, whom the surgeons could always count upon for subjects at any time, of any class or condition.

And now—was Old Stiff playing him fair? Was he in earnest when he offered to assist the detective in "bagging" the gang, simply to make sure his personal enemy was hanged in the end? Or—was it all but another death-trap, cunningly arranged for his eternal discomfiture?

Prince John could hardly think this last, for in the days gone by he had read "Old Stiff" such a bitter lesson that the resurrectionist could hardly have forgotten it, by now.

Still, it was barely possible that fear had been overpowered by a lust for revenge, and knowing this, the Insurance Detective felt no shame in providing for just such a contingency.

It goes without saying that he had decided to keep whatever appointment Old Pap Purkiss might make for him, and that he was going without companionship.

"He'd fly the track if I took a pardner, and if it's sure-enough skull-duggery, the quicker I find it out the better! And then, if it's a square deal, I'd heap sight rather reap all the credit for turning the trick by my lonesome!"

It was in reflections of this nature that the Insurance Special spent a portion of his vigil there in his chamber; but when all minor doubts were settled in his mind, he took one other precautionary step, writing down just where he intended going, and just what he hoped to gain through that alliance with Old Pap Purkiss.

"If I don't turn up to report progress, you can look for me in *that* quarter. If you have to take so much trouble, Paulette, just give 'Old Stiff' an extra pinch for me!"

Sealing this explanation, Prince John

wrote upon the envelope an hour and a date, then descended to the office where the clerk on duty received him with a cordial smile.

Answering that greeting in kind, Prince John handed him the envelope, saying:

"It's strictly between us two, Freeland; but if I don't turn up here by that hour—eight o'clock to-morrow morning—will you give that to Chief of Police Paulette, with your own hands?"

"You bet I will, sir! And if you *do* turn up, sir?"

"I'll reclaim the package, and thank you for holding the same so safely," answered the detective with a bright smile.

The clerk was clearly full of curiosity, but Prince John knew him well enough to feel confident his trust would not be betrayed, and after a little by-chat, he turned away and went back to his chamber.

Neither sign nor word came from Old Pap Purkiss, and as his watch indicated the hour of nine, Prince John began to feel sure that no such message as he longed for would reach him that night.

"I'd dearly like to have it over and settled!" he reflected, frowningly, as he put up his watch. "If I'm hitting up the right scent, that would save us the trouble of playing sexton—ugh!"

The detective broke off with a little shiver, for the thought was by no means an agreeable one to his mind, just then.

There was no time granted him for further dwelling upon that grim fancy, however, for he caught the sound of rapid footsteps drawing nigh, and by instinct divined the truth; Kavanaugh and Morgantrude were promptly on time!

So it proved to be, for when Prince John opened his door, the hand of the insurance agent was lifted to smite panel with knuckles.

"Ready and waiting—glory for *that*, faith!" cried Kavanaugh, who certainly had not fully recovered his mental equilibrium since first receiving that wondrous shock.

"Come inside, gentlemen," quickly spoke the detective, stepping back to give them passage; then, when they were behind closed doors: "You're sharp on time, I see?"

"And *you*, Mr. Prince?" asked the examining physician, in turn. "Can you give us any definite answer, now?"

The detective hesitated, frowning a bit as he pulled his mustache like one who is feeling far from satisfied with either himself or his immediate surroundings.

Noting this, Dr. Morgantrude spoke again.

"Of course it is for *you* to decide, Mr. Prince. We have made all necessary arrangements however, and there is nothing now to hinder or delay an examination, save your own engagements."

"Ah, man, dear!" coaxed Kavanaugh, "don't kape us on nettles, thin!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

SEEKING EVIDENCE IN THE GRAVE.

PRINCE JOHN drew a long breath as he gave another glance at his watch, but then he said:

"It's early for such work, gentlemen, and there is still a chance for my men to show up. Give me the rest of the hour; wait until ten o'clock, and then I'll give you a decided answer."

Kavanaugh seemed a bit disappointed at this, but Dr. Morgantrude was more reasonable, and frankly accepted the arrangement.

While waiting for the appointed time, Prince John was told as to what arrangements had been made, which would insure them all they wished, so far as testing the truth or falsity of that theory.

"I've satisfied the sexton that all is fair and above board," the doctor assured, "and he will be in waiting to open the grave. I have not applied for a regular permit, partly through lack of time, partly because I knew you wished as great secrecy as possible; but as I am a member of the Board of Health, I can insure immunity from arrest, even if we should be caught robbing the grave!"

"Did the sexton agree to such an irregular proceeding?" asked the detective, after a brief pause.

The doctor smiled, then said:

"As to *that*, he'll never know but that

everything is according to Gunter. As a member of the Board of Health, of course I had blanks at my office, and it was easy enough to fill out a permit—well, far enough to answer for this emergency, anyway!"

Kavanaugh laughed, and even the detective smiled, anxious though he felt lest the hour named should come around without aught being heard from Old Pap Purkiss.

True, the old fellow had distinctly stated that he was uncertain as to the time that consultation would take place, but Prince John felt that if *this* should prove to be the night, it was far more certain that the junk-dealer was playing a fair game.

But it was not to be, and when Kavanaugh declared the hour of grace had expired, Prince John yielded with the best will he could muster, simply saying:

"All right, gentlemen. Unless I find a message waiting for me down at the office, I'll be wholly at your service."

There was neither word nor message there, as Prince John was assured by the clerk on duty; and knowing now that it was too late to expect any such notification as old Pap Purkiss had promised, the detective delayed their wishes no longer, but left the hotel in their company.

A few whispered words completed their understanding, and though the distance was considerable, the trio struck out afoot, as it was deemed wisest to lessen the chances of premature discovery as much as possible, and a hack-driver would naturally suspect something of their business from the place to which he was instructed to drive.

There was but little conversation indulged in during that long walk, for their course of procedure had been fairly well marked out in advance, and where so large an amount of money hung trembling in the balance, neither one of the three men felt just like idle chatter.

When once that grim suspicion was set at rest, one way or the other, matters would be different, and then tongues would wag freely enough.

As Dr. Morgantrude had predicted, the sexton in charge of that cemetery was awaiting their coming, having grown a little more grumpy than usual over that unexpected delay. Still, a few well chosen words, with a side hint that his pocket would be no sufferer through that same delay, smoothed matters over a bit.

"You understand just what it is we want, Mr. Singrey?" asked, or rather asserted the examining physician, when the little party were well inside those gates.

"To look inside a grave, your Honor."

"Just that!" with an approving nod. "And you know *which* grave: that is which Adolf Mohler was buried, on the third of this month?"

"I know that, too, sir."

"Well then, why the div—why don't ye be doing av the wurruk, thin, me bucko?" impatiently cut in the excited insurance agent, who had been fidgeting as though the ground scorched his feet, ever since those high gates had closed behind them.

"I'm waiting to see the permit, of course," came the sharp, half-angry retort. "Think I'm going to run my head into a—"

"Easy, gentlemen," gravely interposed the physician, at the same time producing a note-book, out of which he drew a folded paper. "Here you are, Mr. Singrey, and when I assure you that it will be all right, I imagine we'll have no further difficulty."

But the sexton, seemingly in anything but an angelic humor, only growled and grumbled while closely scanning that document by the dim light of his lantern, being so long about it that Kavanaugh narrowly escaped having a fit—for he feared lest, after all, their search for evidence of fraud and criminal conspiracy was coming to an untimely ending.

"You will find it perfectly regular, my dear sir," quietly assured Dr. Morgantrude. "As you possibly are aware, I am on the Board of Health, and as such have the power to authorize an examination of this nature in case good reasons are laid before me."

"I'm not doubting *that*, your Honor, but simply making sure that you haven't forgotten to cover *my* part of the job," grimly declared the sexton, giving an owl's look over his spectacles which he had put on to aid his eyes in deciphering that permit.

Apparently he was satisfied, for he folded up the paper and put it snugly away in an inner pocket; then he added:

"I'll just get my tools, gents, and then I'll show you the place."

"I know the way, thank you," pleasantly replied the physician, making a sign for his friends to follow his lead. "Get your tools, though, and then join us there, please."

"Burr-r-r-r!" rattled the tongue of the insurance agent, as they moved off through the gloom, while that lantern went swaying along in a different direction. "Is it last month, or only a week ago, doctor, dear? Sure, and I thought that div—that *felly*, I mane—would *niver* be a fatter getting t'rough, begad!"

"Your monkey actions were quite enough to arouse his suspicions, Horace," said Prince John, with quite as much earnest as jest. "If you can't put the curb on, old fellow, I'll rule you out of the game—and out of the cemetery, too!"

"I'll do better, now, Prince," soberly promised the agent. "'Twas my fearing that div—ow-wow! I wouldn't be cursing in *these* grounds for me best old hat, faith! And you—maybe I'd better button me lip, and kape up thinking enough to do for both!"

"I really reckon you *had*, Kavanaugh, and begin right now. Yonder comes the sexton, and—this is the spot, then, doctor?"

Dr. Morgantrude answered in the affirmative, and when the sexton came up, he confirmed that assertion.

"Is it to make sure that the grave is occupied, gentlemen, or do you wish to examine the body itself?" was his first question, as he removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

"Both, Mr. Singrey. And the sooner your job is over, the heavier will be your pocket, remember!" said the doctor.

That seemed to be the right sort of spur for sluggish blood, and grasping his spade, the sexton briskly turned over the dirt, opening the grave as only an old and practiced hand can.

It was a grim scene, all told.

The night was comparatively clear, as far as clouds were concerned, although there seemed to be a far-off, thin haze which partially dimmed the twinkling stars.

It was yet too early for the moon to show itself, and there was nothing in that secluded quarter of the vast cemetery to light up surrounding objects, save the one lantern brought by the sexton.

As that excavation proceeded, Prince John held this lantern so the rays favored the worker, all hands being somewhat encouraged as Sexton Singrey declared that, so far as he could see, that grave had not been disturbed since he originally closed it over the body of Adolf Mohler.

Evidently spurred to greater efforts than would have been exhibited only for that hint at a liberal reward, the grave-digger performed his allotted task in a marvelously brief space of time, and as his spade came in contact with wood for the first time, he called forth:

"The coffin's here, gents, or it'd sound hollow, like!"

"Go on; we want more than that bare assurance, man!" sternly called back Dr. Morgantrude. "Lay all bare, then expose the coffin fully."

Singrey fell to work again, busily, and in less than five minutes more he had the rough outside case opened, and the cloth-covered casket made visible by the yellow gleams from the lantern.

"There you are, gentlemen!" the sexton spoke, straightening up, with open hands clasping his back by way of a strengthening plaster. "Will I open it here, or must it be hauled outside?"

"Can you remove the lid, down there, sexton?" asked Morgantrude, as the three men gathered close to the opening, bending over to peer downward with intense interest.

"If you want it that way, yes, sir," came the prompt reply.

"Do so, then. And when—hadn't you better take the lantern, though?"

"Never mind; I can see plain enough for—just a bit more to the head, if you'll be so kind, sir!"

Briskly plying his screw-driver, Sexton

Singrey was not long in making it possible to lift the lid of the coffin, and as he started to do this, he called back again:

"The body is here, safe enough, gents!"

"Look at the left hand, thin, and see if—" began Kavanaugh; but before he could say more, a firm hand closed over his lips

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORE THAN THEY BARGAINED FOR.

THAT hand belonged to Prince John, and it was the detective's voice which made itself heard an instant later:

"That's all right, Singrey. You climb out here, and let *me* do the rest, for—"

That sentence was never finished, for just then there came a red sheet of flame from out the darkness to the rear of those graves, and at least one surely aimed bullet went crashing through the lantern which Prince John was passing over to Dr. Morgantrude, while the air seemed fairly filled with the vicious whistling of lead from rifled tubes.

Naturally enough the trio there beside the opened grave were taken all aback, for nothing had been more remote from their thoughts than any such attack; and then, before they could fully realize what it all meant, there went up loud, fierce shouts, among which could be distinguished the words:

"Ghouls! Body-snatchers! Down 'em, boys! Down 'em, for—"

Then an inkling of the ugly truth seemed to burst upon the mind of the Insurance Detective, and in his turn he cried out, sternly:

"Rush 'em, men! Charge, and hold fast to all you can lay hands on!"

Without waiting to see if Kavanaugh or Morgantrude fairly comprehended his words, or if they were bold enough to back him up in this rush against a force of unknown strength, Prince John dropped the remnant of that ruined lantern, and guided by the cries of the enemy, he dashed swiftly ahead, ready for one to hold fast to all good luck might throw into his hands.

Almost as surely as though that fact had been published in plain words, the detective knew that this was a last, desperate move of the as yet unnamed gang whose daring trickery he had sworn to lay bare before the eye of the law; and knowing, too, what a help it would be to his work if one of the rascals could be fairly caught, he not only did his level best along that line, but shouted forth the same advice to his friends.

But fortune was against the detective at this stage of the game, and just when he was fairly glimpsing one or more of those enemies, he came to grief.

As already mentioned, the night was far from being a light one, and the grave whose evidence was expected to prove so much, was located in a secluded portion of the cemetery, where there were no lamps to relieve that gloom.

Hence it happened that, just when he sighted an enemy, Prince John tripped over a sunken grave, and losing his balance in his mad haste, fell heavily at full length, his head coming into violent contact with a low corner-stone which marked the unfenced lots in that section.

It was a mercy his brains were not knocked out, for the fall was a heavy one, and the blow severe.

As it was, the Insurance Detective gave no cry, emitted not even a groan, lying as he fell, in an awkward heap, seeing, hearing, knowing nothing of all that might be taking place immediately around him.

And then, when his scattered wits began to come back to their abiding-place, Prince John heard but comprehended not, listening like one in a nightmare dream to the hoarse, half-frightened calling of Horace Kavanaugh.

"Ow-wow—Prince! Whayre the div-blessed saints be ye, annyhow? Oh-h-h Prince! Av ye're dead, why don't ye s-a-a-y so?"

And then, with a little more reality, came the shout of the examining physician, Morgantrude.

"Don't raise the whole State, Kavanaugh! Where are you, and where is the grave which— Oh, thunder and guns!"

That was accompanied by an explosive grunt as the portly physician tripped in the darkness over some unseen but now certainly

felt obstacle; and as Prince John fancied how that dignified gentleman must look while performing such unwonted gymnastics, he broke into a laugh which did more than all else to restore his senses.

Horace Kavanaugh caught the first notes of that cachinnation, and with his superstition fairly awakened, now, gave another explosion of angry doubt and inquiry.

"What's that, thin? Av ye're the divil, go scat! Av ye're honest flesh and blood—sp'ake out, will ye, begobs!"

"Kavanaugh—what ye got, there?" Prince John managed to utter in fairly distinguishable tones, at the same time struggling to his feet, not yet fully realizing what had befallen, but with a dim notion that he surely ought to be up and doing.

That exertion, however, sent the blood with a mad rush to his head, and turning deathly dizzy and faint, the Insurance Detective clasped his temples with both hands, reeling, to fall in a heap again, giving forth a choking cry as his limbs failed him.

Still, he made sound enough, and distinct enough, to guide his two friends to that spot; and when his senses came back again, Prince John found himself under the doctor's care, with Horace Kavanaugh kneeling hard by, asking questions and biting short the curses which he was too superstitious to give full vent to within that ghostly inclosure.

"What's the matter, anyhow?" were the first words which came from those lips as the detective pushed away that ministering hand, and sat up. "What makes—who hit me with—a saw-log?"

"Not yet. Wait until you're better able to talk, Prince," soothingly spoke the doctor; but Kavanaugh blurted forth:

"Ghosts, begonies! Thayre was a whoop and a whooroo—a rush and a hustle—shouting and shooting and playing the divil all over! But niver a ketch could I catch, be gad! And thin—av I didn't tumble all over ivery grave inside these fences, sor, thin it's me mother's son would like to know the reason why! Yes, sor! And divil a lie in the telling av it all, nayther!"

By this time Prince John could recall pretty much all that had happened up to the instant of his flying fall, and with a low, startled cry he struggled to his feet, hands tightly clasping temples to quell that wretched dizziness, staring half blankly around them as he muttered:

"What can it all mean? They called—I heard 'em say body-snatching—but where are they?"

"You say, for it's clean past me!" broke in Morgantrude.

"If white—wouldn't they wait to see if—Heavens!" as a most unwelcome suspicion broke upon his brain. "If they should—where's the grave? Call up the sexton, for—*find the body, men!*"

Imperfectly though that ugly suspicion was expressed in those words, both Morgantrude and Kavanaugh caught its purport, and each man instinctively broke away, taking the course which their rather confused sense of locality told them was the correct one.

Paying no attention to their movements, thinking only of solving his ugly doubts as speedily as possible, Prince John hurried back on the line he fancied was the right one, at the same time shouting aloud the name of the old sexton.

No answer came from Singrey, and when he felt convinced that he had gone astray in some manner the Insurance Detective paused, forcing his wits to act with clearness in spite of his painfully throbbing head.

He quickly saw where he had gone wrong, and turning to the left, the detective hurried across a number of graves, giving a little cry of grim delight as he caught sight of the mound of fresh earth which had been thrown out of the grave where Adolf Mohler had been deposited by sorrowing friends.

"This way, friend!" Prince John called out, distinctly, then added: "Where are you, Singrey? What makes you—"

While speaking thus, he was advancing quickly, and his speech broke off abruptly as he caught sight of a motionless figure lying there on top of the earth-mound.

With a swift bound he was by its side, and, stooping, in spite of the dim light he recognized the old sexton, stunned or dead!

For a brief space he seemed paralyzed, but

then, with a low, hoarse cry the detective dropped himself into that opened grave, feeling for what he could not find!

"Gone! Stolen away while we— Foiled, by the eternal!" cried Prince John as his hands felt only that empty casket!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHO TURNED THE TRICK.

DRAWN to the right spot by that directing shout, both Morgantrude and Kavanaugh reached the scene as Prince John gave vent to that startling discovery.

The examining physician said nothing, for he had plainly discounted the truth by this time; but not so the insurance agent.

Kavanaugh broke into a torrent of exclamations, mingling his lamentations with fierce curses, and in his hot rage forgetting his superstitious awe of the abode of the dead.

Prince John climbed out of the rifled grave, and Horace Kavanaugh tumbled in—no less will fairly express his method; but with a cool half-million at stake, to say nothing of his reputation as a "safe underwriter," little marvel at his excitement.

"Look to Singrey, doctor," said the detective as he scrambled out of that pit. "Maybe he can tell something. If I yell, come a-rushing!"

Without delaying to say more, the Insurance Special hurried off in almost hopeless quest; but he knew that was his final chance, now, and fortune might give him a fair shake, even yet.

Dr. Morgantrude first made a cursory examination of the poor old sexton, making sure that he was still living, although senseless as yet, then he groped around until he found the broken lantern.

Striking a match, he found that there was a possibility for a light on a humble scale, thanks to the lack of a breeze; for enough oil remained in the reservoir, and the wick had not been injured by those shots.

"What's the use, doctor?" gloomily muttered Kavanaugh, climbing out of the grave, slowly and stiffly as though sudden age or rheumatism had claimed him for its own. "Sure, the corpse is gone—cl'ane vanished away on the wings av—the legs av the divil, better say, faith!"

"Hold the light so that I can see how to—steady, can't you?" almost harshly spoke the physician, forcing compliance at once.

It did not take long to decide upon the nature of the harm which had come to Sexton Singrey; there was a bloody gash running half-way across his gray scalp, showing how ruthlessly those unknown persons had cleared their path.

But it proved that no bones were broken, and presently the sexton began to revive, thanks to the skillful ministrations of the doctor; and he was able to do a bit of talking when Prince John came back, empty-handed from his blind quest for the missing, both living and dead.

Keenly enough the old man was put to the question, but their reward was far short of what they hoped for.

As a matter of course he had heard the wild alarm, and not knowing what it might result in, he scrambled out of the grave as hurriedly as possible, getting outside just as the three gentlemen rushed away in the direction from whence those shots were sped.

While he was looking in that direction, some one or more persons rushed up from the opposite side of the grave, and before he could do more than catch a bare glimpse of a big man with uplifted arms, a heavy blow fell upon his head, and he knew nothing more until now.

In vain Prince John questioned him as to his assailant; all he could say was already said: a big man struck him down, and he neither saw nor heard anything more until his senses were restored by Dr. Morgantrude.

By means of that restored light, Prince John made another and more thorough examination of the grave, finding the coffin still there, but the body gone.

There was no sign left behind to indicate the bold players of this daring trick; and when fully satisfied on that point, the Insurance Detective climbed out of the rifled

grave, giving the old sexton a liberal sum of money, then saying:

"Fill the hole again, please, and say nothing at all concerning this job, unless you are called upon by Chief Paulette, or a member of his force. You can do both, my friend?"

The sexton promptly declared his ability, for with such a precious plaster for his ills, his cut scalp was really hardly worth mentioning!

Leaving the sexton to complete the work, then, the trio of amateur resurrectionists moved away, looking for some sign or clue which might lead up to a full solution of that mystery, but with no success.

True, not one of the three men had even hoped for such success, for a glance at the face of a watch before they parted with the sexton and his dilapidated lantern, told them how long a time had elapsed since that startling attack was made.

Prince John had lain insensible more than long enough for the enemy to win clear of the grounds, even while burdened with such a disagreeable weight to carry.

The Insurance Special was fiercely out of humor, and when the trio passed through the cemetery gates, facing toward the city without being able to catch even a glimpse or a sound to tell them where or whither the victors in that night game had fled, his rage burst forth as he seldom permitted temper to master his tongue.

"I've lost this trick, gentlemen, but with you as witnesses I swear to win this game in the end! And I swear by all mankind holds holy, I will never give over until each and every one of these devils have paid full price for the fun they've been having at our expense!"

This said, the detective pushed on at a rapid pace for town, paying no outward notice to the perplexed marvelings of his companions, who were vainly trying to decide upon the persons who could, with any degree of justice, be accused of turning that trick.

When pointedly questioned by either man, Prince John made a curt reply, but it was precious little information, and even less consolation, that they extracted from him.

Still, the Insurance Detective was doing a vast amount of thinking during that trip from cemetery to town, and while it could hardly be said that he knew *just who* had turned that clever trick, he believed that he could say *just why* it had been done.

When nearly at their journey's end, Prince John asked for and obtained the pledge that neither Morgantrude nor Kavanaugh would make mention of their night adventure before they were granted full leave, either by Prince or by Chief Paulette.

"Of course I've got to tell him, for without plenty of help to cover the ground, we'd stand not a ghost of a show to corral that corpus."

"Do you think we'll get it, then, sure, man dear?" eagerly asked the insurance agent, still trying to cling to hope.

"We will if we do, and if we don't, I'm afraid we won't," oracularly quoth the detective, his good-nature too nearly exhausted to withstand more idle chatter.

With a parting word of caution, Prince John hurried away to pay a visit to the Central Station on the chance of catching Chief Paulette still at his post; a hope which proved founded on fact, for that worthy official was a "regular night-hawk," and a true glutton for work when business pressed, as it surely did right now.

Without telling all that had led up to that graveyard expedition, but promising to make all clear when there was more time to spare, the Insurance Special told how they had opened the grave of Adolf Mohler, only to have the prize snatched out of their hands just when they were on the verge of proving or disproving the startling theory Prince John had formed concerning the Hillyard affair.

"And you wish me to do—what?"

"To warn your men without further loss of time, to guard all avenues of escape from this city, particularly the depots," swiftly the detective.

"Then you fancy?"

"That the rascals may try to ship this body East, there to be buried as it was claimed the remains of Hilary Hillyard were to be. If the body is got clear of Frisco now,

we may win our game in the end, but it will call for a mighty sight more fighting, and that fighting with all the chances against us. Will you do this much, unsight-unseen, chief?"

"On your word, yes, Prince," gravely answered Paulette.

"Thanks, awfully! And now, I'm going to bed as quick as I know how!" declared the detective, taking his leave and going to his hotel.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PRINCE JOHN GOES INTO HIDING.

THE next day Prince John was astir at a fairly early hour for one who had been so late in getting to bed, and though his head was in hardly the best of condition, he cut scant time to waste in seeking an interview with the chief of police.

Virgo Paulette had kept his word in relation to putting his force on the alert, but as yet nothing had come of that precaution.

"Still, of one thing you can rest assured, Prince," Paulette said, quietly. "Unless your men hustled the package out of town before word was sent out, they will never get shut of it after that fashion."

"If they try to ship it as regular?"

"Not even then. My instructions are to hold all such freight for examination, and in case of any objection being offered, to place any and all such under arrest."

This explanation satisfied the Insurance Special that nothing more could be done in this quarter, and calling again at his hotel to make sure no word had been left for him by Old Pap Purkiss, he sallied forth once for a visit to the sand-lots section.

It was rather early in the day, as he admitted to himself, yet there was nothing of greater importance which demanded his attention just then, and having met with such an unexpected backset in the one quarter, he feverishly hoped to make amends for that ill-luck in this.

And yet—was that graveyard fiasco attributable in any degree to the old body-snatcher?

Prince John certainly did not wish to think of "Old Stiff" as playing him false in this emergency, yet no man knew better than he what an utterly conscienceless rascal the old resurrectionist really was, or how readily he would sell out a man he had sworn to serve faithfully, provided he thought he could make a bigger stake by proving treacherous.

The detective had an abundance of thought-food to keep his wits from going to sleep while he was making his way to the Sand-lots, but he had by no means fairly settled his doubts, for or against Old Pap Purkiss, when he at length came in sight of that goodly sized but ram-shackly building.

The direction from which he made his approach hindered Prince John from seeing that certain gable window, at first, so his suspense was a bit prolonged; but then—a grim chuckle rose in his throat, for from one side of the lower sash there fluttered in the faint breeze a *white rag!*

Back to his memory flashed the directions given him by Old Pap Purkiss, and Prince John knew that the meeting of the evil gang was fixed to take place that same evening.

With doubts set at rest on that particular point, the Insurance Detective sauntered on in lazy, aimless fashion, partly to give the junk-dealer time to observe his coming, partly to throw any other who might be on the lookout, off the scent of his real purpose.

Taking his time thus, Prince John presently brought up in front of that dingy show-window, where the battered old saber was once more hanging in company with the rusty revolvers.

He had scarcely time to view these "priceless relics" over, when Pap Purkiss came to the window on the inner side, and in a low but perfectly distinct tone addressed him:

"They meet to night, and you want to be on deck! Don't be hanging round here too much. Go way now, and come back at early dusk."

"All right. How'll I get in when I do come?" asked the detective, in similar tones.

"I'll be on the lookout. Come to the rear side, and I'll let you in that room by a back door. Don't talk, but if you understand

fully, tip your hat and scratch your head by your left ear."

After a perfectly natural fashion Prince John gave the sign mentioned, and then, in obedience to a warning gesture from the junk-dealer, he turned and slouched on in his aimless stroll, only turning back toward the main portion of the city when he was fully convinced there was no person spying upon his movements.

Prince John went back to his hotel, where word was to be left for him by Chief Paulette in case any tidings should be obtained in relation to that stolen body; but no such message was awaiting him, and feeling a little the worse for wear, the detective passed up to his chamber, thinking that an hour or two of sleep would help him out.

That fall and blow from the corner-stone in the cemetery had been a severe one, and to-day his head was "aching fit to split."

Although Prince failed to quite lose himself in slumber, the quiet and rest worked him no little good, for he arose to an early supper feeling almost as sound as ever, and fully capable of tackling the job he had on hand for that evening.

Before setting forth on his second visit that day to the Sand-lots, Prince John renewed the precautions he had taken the day before, thus insuring swift punishment for his enemies in case this rendezvous should prove to be a death-trap.

With the feeling of a man who had neglected nothing which ought to be attended to, then, Prince John hurried along until near that rendezvous. Then he made a silent circuit of the place, noting naught which could strengthen his really faint suspicion of treachery.

There was a dim light burning in the junk-shop proper, as well as hints of lights in still another room, which Prince John hardly doubted would prove to be that in which the conspirators were to meet; but with all this, the building was silent, and really seemed to be deserted.

Feeling that he had taken all the precautions possible without running the risk of frightening or angering the man on whose good will he was mainly dependent for success, just then, the Special Detective passed on to the rear of the building, looking for the back-door spoken of by Old Pap Purkiss.

That was found without difficulty, and as he came close to it, the barrier opened cautiously, and a claw-like hand came out, gropingly.

"I began to think you'd flunked it, boss!" a husky whisper made itself heard an instant later.

"That's you, Pap?"

The shaggy pate of the junk-dealer showed itself by way of answer, and that claw fixed upon an arm, drawing the detective in at the door while its owner whispered:

"It's all right, and you're just in time! There's been no change, so far as I know, and if you play your part strictly according to directions, sir, you'll know the whole business inside of the next two hours!"

Prince John entered willingly enough, although one hand was gripping a revolver-butt, and his trained muscles were held in readiness for swift and deadly work in case aught of treachery was intended.

But that seemed to be a needless precaution. Old Pap Purkiss made no movement which could by any possibility be twisted into false play, and though the closing of that door left them in utter darkness, his hand offered guidance until there came the flicker and sputter of a match being lighted.

By the glow of this miniature torch, Prince John saw that they were in the same bare room where Purkiss had unmasked his ingenious hiding-place, and that they alone were the occupants.

Old Pap led the detective across to the chimney, when the match burned itself out and the last spark was dropped to the floor. As it fell, the junk dealer whispered again:

"I'm going to open it up, boss, and while it's hardly likely that a light in here would be seen, even if the boys had showed up, already, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather keep it dark."

"Burning a match in there won't hurt, will it, Pap?"

"No, sir, but—"

"Open up, step inside and make a gleam, then," curtly directed the Insurance Special, giving the junkman a slight shove in that direction.

Old Pap Purkiss complied without a word, and utilizing that light to assure himself no change had been made in the retreat since he saw it last, Prince John quickly stepped inside.

And just as he did this, there came to his ears a coarse laugh from around the front of the building.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHO KILLED HILARY HILLYARD?

"That's Denny Delougherty!" declared Old Pap Purkiss at sound of that distant voice. "He's coming with one or more of the boys, and—on your life, sir! don't make any sound that can set 'em on edge, or all blazes can't save either of us!"

While hurriedly whispering thus, Old Pap Purkiss was opening the tiny trio of peep-holes of which previous mention has been made, and the detective saw as many small eyes of light penetrating the gloom which had until then filled that place of concealment.

From the front of the building came another and less merry sound: that of a powerful voice calling on Old Pap Purkiss; and the junk-dealer only lingered for a last caution:

"Be silent, sir, or we're gone suckers! Use eyes and ears, and make sure of Denny! Hang him—hang him higher'n a kite!"

Without waiting for reply or to say more, Old Pap Purkiss beat a retreat, closing that stone masked door upon the detective, then skurrying away in hot haste to meet the noisy members at the front.

Stooping for a glance through each one of those tiny loop-holes, Prince John made sure that, as yet, the room upon which they opened, was unoccupied, then he struck a match and made a swift but fairly satisfactory examination of his own contracted quarters.

There was nothing to excite his suspicions, and drawing the stool to a position more convenient for his espial, he sat down, letting the burnt match fall, passing his eyes easily from hole to hole, giving a nod of grim approval as he saw how very conveniently everything had been arranged by the inquisitive junk-dealer.

He had barely time for this, when the door beyond was flung rudely open, to give admittance to several men, last of whom was Old Pap Purkiss.

The larger of the other couple paused at the round card-table that stood near the center of the room, slapping a heavy hand upon its top as he roughly spoke:

"Give us the papers, Pap, and something to smoke, with a bit of the best stuff you've got in stock. And then—well, keep your distance, my bucko!"

The two ruffians seated themselves at the table, but said nothing until Old Pap returned, with cards, cigars and a couple of bottles containing liquor of some description. Then the biggest of the pair spoke:

"That's enough for now, Pap. You skin out, and send in the rest when they show up. And—mind ye, old rat! Don't you try any of your dirty tricks on me, my darling! I'll rip your black heart out if I catch you listening or trying to spy over us—savvy?"

"Did I ever play you crooked, Delougherty?" demanded the junk-dealer, speaking that name with particular distinctness, as though inviting the hidden detective to pay especial note. "You know I never went back on you like that, Dennis Delougherty!"

"It's fear, then, and not love that's kept you on the square, faith!"

Purkiss made no answer to this jeer, but as he turned to leave the room, his gleaming eyes seemed to fix themselves upon those of Prince John, and the Special saw him make a veiled gesture of warning.

Both knaves looked after their host until the door closed behind him, then the smaller fellow said, in lowered tones but which were amply loud for those listening ears:

"You're giving Old Pap a mighty rough deal, Delougherty."

"Not nigh so rough as he'll get if—Some

o' these fine days, Tom, I'll have to rip that scoundrel wide open; I will, for a fact!"

"Why? You surely don't think he'd blow the gaff, Denny?"

"In a holy minute if he thought he could turn the trick without my twisting his neck, instead! But I've got him—just so!"

To emphasize as well as illustrate his meaning, the thug pressed a broad thumb heavily on the table.

Before anything further could be said, there came sounds from the outer room, and then the door opened to admit another rough-clad fellow, who was boisterously greeted by the two thugs ahead of him.

"Little more and you'd been barred out, me bucko!" declared Delougherty, helping himself to a liberal swig from one of the bottles, then wiping its mouth with his sleeve before handing it across to the newcomer. "Poison yourself, man, dear!"

That polite invitation was complied with, and then the fellow said:

"Barred out, is it, Dennis? And why the likes of that, I'm asking?"

"Look at your watch, man! I'd show ye the hour, but I left mine at me uacle's, faith!"

"Late, is it? Well, I'm here ahead of the boss, anyhow, and that's the main point, I'm thinking," philosophically retorted the other, seating himself at the table and picking up the cards in an aimless way. "He'll show up, of course, Denny?"

"He'd better, faith!" and there was a thinly masked menace lying back of those words. "He's put off paying for his dirty work too long as it is, and if he flunks now—"

"We're clean left: is that it, Delougherty?"

"Don't you think it, pardner! If he don't come to us, I'll go to him—and I'll have a bit of good metal in my grip that won't be silver or gold, either!"

The fellow who had taken no part as yet in that talk, now flung out a hand with an impatient, or angry gesture.

"That's where you've got the bulge on us, Delougherty! You know who and what the boss is, but *we*—nothing!"

"Who wanted the trick turned, anyway; Denny?" coaxingly asked the third thug. "What sort of grudge had he against old Hillyard, to begin with?"

Delougherty leaned back in his chair, laughing coarsely, with a touch of mockery in both face and voice.

"It's only a grudge, then, that calls for putting out a light, you think, Jim? Well, let it go at that, if you fancy the notion best."

The lesser thug seemed puzzled, but presently he spoke again:

"If it wasn't a grudge, why would he offer such big money for the job? What could he hope to gain by shutting off the old man's wind?"

Delougherty laughed again: a low, grim chuckle.

"That's what bothered me, faith, until I began to look deeper below the surface. Then—well, when the papers print all about how that big pile of insurance money is claimed, granted and paid over; when it is told to everybody *just who* all those big policies were signed over to—then you'll smoke the rat, just as I did through exercising my own wits!"

The big thug spoke boastfully enough, yet there seemed to be a fair basis for that vaunt; and as he looked and listened to it all, Prince John felt hardly a doubt but that the rascal was speaking naked truth.

His two pals looked at the fellow with mingled curiosity and admiration. In their eyes he seemed a hero.

"You mean—not the boss, Denny?" asked Jim.

"That's a lie, whether ye mean it so or not, faith!" coarsely cried Delougherty, again kissing the black bottle. "Who else would promise me such a pile o' good money for splitting the skull of an ould devil like Hillyard? And who else—but that don't count, me hearties!"

"Augh-h-h! Wasn't we in the job with ye, Denny? And don't we run the same risk with ye, for a mighty sight less pay?"

"Pay which we haven't fingered yet, too!" sulkily growled the third member of the gang. "When'll that pay-day come, Delougherty?"

"You'll get it to-night, Tom, or we'll all know the reason why! If the high-roller thinks he can play fast and loose with Denny Delougherty any longer, it's fooled he'll find himself, sure! These hands shut off the wind of one man, lately, and *if they have to*, it's another they'll not be slow to polish off, then!"

"But he'll come to time, I'm hoping," more amicably observed Jim. "And so it's him who is to bag all that pile o' insurance I've heard 'em chinning about, Denny?"

"Did I say so, then?" with a meaning-leer on his coarse visage.

"Who is he, anyhow, Delougherty?" asked Tom, rousing up again.

"That'd be telling, if I was to say, me hearty! But there's no law against your asking *the boss* when he shows up, for—and there's your chance coming right now!" as a sound came from the front.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CAUGHT IN A DEATH-TRAP.

WITH all his doubts banished as to the truth of Old Pap Purkiss, Prince John watched every movement made by the Frisco thugs, caught every word they uttered, feeling the fierce exultation of a successful hunter of men who finds his coveted victory fairly within his grasp.

And yet, at first he felt sure there was something crooked in it all, for was it not fairly proven that yonder fire-scarred corpse could not by any possibility be all that was left of the heavily insured, Hilary Hillyard?

Yet, would even a conscienceless thug like Dennis Delougherty own up to a murder which had never been committed?

And then, in his fierce eagerness to see "the boss" who had offered such "big money" for the "removal" of another, the Insurance Special pretty well lost sight of that contradiction.

Although listening for some such sound, he caught no word or noise which could be so interpreted, and it was with the spasmodic start of a man who rouses from an unwitting doze that Prince John turned his gaze toward that door. And—what caused that odd—was it smoke?

The detective sought to brush a hand across his eyes, for something seemed to be blurring his vision. Smoke, or dust, or—How strangely heavy his hand felt!

And then—with a fierce horror John Prince caught sight of an inkling of the truth: *he had been decoyed into a death-trap!*

That dimness of vision turned to complete blindness, yet he was dimly aware of the fact that those three loopholes were closed by some unseen means, while the air about him grew hot and close, thick and heavy until his lungs clogged up and refused to perform their duty longer!

He tried to cry out, to spring to his feet, to grasp a weapon; but all in vain. And then—he knew no more, but seemed to descend into the silence and obscurity of the tomb!

"It's all over but polishing off, boys!" croaked Old Pap Purkiss, as he flung open the door toward which the three thugs were looking, just then.

"You've turned the trick, then, Pap?" cried Delougherty, springing to his feet in such haste that his heavy heels sent his wooden chair flying across the room. "You've got the rat trapped?"

"So mighty snug he can't even squeal!" came the viciously triumphant reply. "Come! You can take what the old man gives into your paws, I reckon?"

"Take it, and hold it, too!" declared the big thug, now at the doorway. "Get there, Pap! It's mighty nigh too good news for true, so—seeing is believing, and that's what's ailing my blooming peepers right now!"

Jim and Tom were scarcely less excited than their bigger pal, but Delougherty was saying enough for three, and they were content to follow in his wake as Old Pap Purkiss led the way around to the room into which the Insurance Special had been so cleverly decoyed.

The three thugs gripped weapons and stood ready for swift and hot work when the junk-dealer put forth a hand to work the hidden mechanism controlling that death-trap. They plainly could not fully credit

their bloodless victory over the dreaded detective, and would have been less surprised to see him dash forth, guns in hand, dangerous as a cornered panther, than to find him helpless at their mercy.

Not so Old Pap Purkiss. He had perfect faith in the powerful drug with which he had filled that den, and without taking even the common precaution to step aside, he flung wide that stone-masked door, laughing viciously as he saw how his pals brought forward their weapons.

"Hold your breath or stop your nose, lads!" he gave warning. "Only for a minute, to let the stuff rise above us. Now—look! Isn't that a holy picnic for you, my babes?"

Laughing again, the cunning traitor pointed inside that death-trap, where they could see Prince John, sitting rigidly erect upon his stool, but seemingly petrified while in the very act of playing spy and eaves-dropper.

"If he makes a break, don't—"

"If he does, drill me in his place!" broke in the junk-dealer, stepping forward and rudely clapping palm against that corpse-like face.

The detective swayed over until his head and one shoulder rested against the wall, but that was all. Not a sound came from his lips, not a voluntary motion told that he felt that blow or meant to avenge that insult.

This proof was sufficient to banish the mingled doubts and fears which the three thugs had entertained, and with a low, vicious chuckle, Dennis Delougherty entered that den, his huge hands closing upon the decoyed detective.

"Not in here, Denny!" warningly cried Old Pap Purkiss, evidently believing the big ruffian meant murder out of hand. "Haul him out, and carry him to the other room."

"Pull his teeth, Denny!" warned one of those lesser lights of villainy. "Don't take any off-chances, for—look how he croaked poor Sam Pitkin!"

Fiercely exultant though he was, Delougherty was not above profiting by such prudent advice, and hauling the helpless victim of treachery into the room, he quickly removed all weapons from his person.

"Fetch him this way, Denny," asked Purkiss, moving toward the door. "Once in the other room, we can handle him to better advantage. Help him fetch, lads!"

"Out of the way, little 'uns!" gruffly cried Delougherty, grasping the drugged detective around the middle, then swinging him to a broad shoulder with ease. "I'd tote a dozen like him!"

Old Pap Purkiss led the way to the room in which the three thugs had held fast the attention of the trapped detective while the prime author of that cunning trick completed his work by filling that close den with stupefying fumes.

Delougherty dumped his burden into one of those chairs, and holding him in an erect posture, watched the minor rascals binding the detective fast.

Opposite, Old Pap Purkiss was viciously grinning at the helpless man, now shaking a clinched fist in front of his face, now going through the motions of slitting a throat or ripping open a bosom.

"Augh-h-h. let up, you old ape!" contemptuously cried Delougherty, as he took note of these actions. "You wouldn't dare do that if the bloodhounds could see you, so why—"

"Ah-ha! that's just the beauty of it all, man!" croaked the junk-dealer, seemingly beside himself with venomous triumph as he clumsily pranced in front of the snared detective. "He can see all I'm doing! He can hear every word I utter! He is just as much alive—barring the power of talking or fighting back—as any one of ye this moment!"

Those lesser lights shrunk back a bit, and even Dennis Delougherty seemed taken aback by this assertion; but not for long.

"I believe you're lying, Pap, but if not—what's the odds? Prince John'll never tell what he sees or hears, for he's got to croak—and right now's as good a time as any, I say!"

As he spoke, the big thug whipped forth a huge knife and flourished it above his head.

Just then there was a slight clatter of falling glass at the window, and, as Delougherty swung that ugly weapon over the doomed detective, a sharp explosion came through that broken pane, and with a yell of angry pain his crippled arm fell helpless to his side.

Almost at once the door was dashed open, and a number of policemen sprung into the room, Paulette at their head.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TOUGH TANGLE UNTANGLED.

LIKE ONE in a horrible nightmare dream, Prince John lived through all that, unable to help himself or to take part in the brisk little fight which ended in the capture of the two lesser thugs and Old Pap Purkiss.

As for Dennis Delougherty, in spite of his crippled right arm, he made such a desperate fight in order to save the bound detective it was necessary to beat him down with clubbed revolvers.

The big body-snatcher never rose from that blood-stained floor again, in life. His skull was fractured so terribly that death came to his relief in less than half an hour.

It was not until he had been conveyed to the Central Station, there to be placed under the care of a police surgeon, that John Prince rallied from that strange stupor—or physical paralysis—into which he had been cast by the drug so cunningly administered him by the old body-snatcher.

In hopes of lightening his own punishment, Pap Purkiss disclosed the secret of that peculiar disability, and thus guided, it did not take long for the surgeon to break that unholy spell.

There was much to be told, much to explain away before all minor points could be clearly understood; but Old Pap Purkiss, now fairly in the toils, and fully realizing that nothing less than complete submission could serve him at all, made a clean breast of all he knew.

Then, too, Chief Paulette had an important capture to talk over with the Insurance Detective, while both Horace Kavanaugh and Dr. Morgantrude were on hand with their quota of information.

Putting it all together, like an intricate patchwork pattern, the whole truth of that Hillyard Case became clear as day.

As Prince John had long since suspected, there was a game within a game; but the main object of the Nob Hill conspirators was to cheat the Insurance Companies out of a large amount of money.

As the first step, Hilary Hillyard insured his life in nearly a dozen different companies, aggregating a round half-million of dollars, paying the first premium, and then devoting the major portion of the next half-year to completing his arrangements for the grand coup.

His secondary object was to ruin Leonard Westlake, whom he had learned to bate with the bitterest rancor, and who, as we have seen, was almost equally disliked by both Mrs. Hillyard and her son by a former marriage, Oren Poole.

The latter insisted on the seeming murder being fastened upon Leonard Westlake, as that stigma, even should the young man escape hanging for the supposed assassination, would certainly ruin his hopes of winning the hand, heart and fortune of Ethelyn Garland, with whom Oren was fiercely in love.

It was at first planned to have the house destroyed by fire, and only the few bones which would remain after that ordeal be shown as proof of death; but then, by one of those strange coincidences which sometimes come to the surface, Adolf Mohler, who was almost the duplicate of Hilary Hillyard, so far as height and weight are concerned, died of heart disease, and was buried where he could be utilized for that daring imposture.

It was at this point that Old Pap Purkiss entered the game, and by his "professional" skill, the grave was rifled and the corpse hidden in the Hillyard house until required for its ghastly part in the game.

The more surely to escape suspicion themselves, Oren Poole and his mother left the city for a visit to friends living in Sacramento City, and purposely bringing about an open quarrel with the step son, whom he had so ruthlessly doomed to ignominy if not to death on the gallows, Hilary Hillyard placed

that stolen body upon his bed, dealt that blow with the sharp hatchet, to make sure the charge of murder would "stick," then set fire to the drapery, and, assured that the work would be well done, stole unheard and unseen, as he believed, out of and away from the house.

It was a mere chance that John Morris, the butler, glimpsed that retreating figure, and a perfectly honest mistake he made in taking it to be the young master whom he loved so well, both for his own sake and on his dead mother's account.

When it was judged the fire had gained sufficient headway, Dennis Delougherty, who had helped Old Pap Purkiss rifle the grave, gave the alarm of fire which aroused the servants, then fled unseen.

That will, far ante-dated, which provided for the sending of his body to the far-away Vermont homestead, was made by Hilary Hillyard to guard against any odd chances of that stolen corpse making trouble. And, while a casket filled with sand and rags was actually dispatched on the long journey, the actual corpse was concealed until night, then returned to its rightful resting-place by "Old Stiff" and his gang.

Hilary Hillyard went into hiding, carefully disguising himself, meaning to lie low until his supposed widow had secured the insurance money and the affair was in goodly measure forgotten: then he meant to steal away from San Francisco, to enjoy the remainder of life with his wife, on that comfortable little fortune!

Instead, he was recognized by a former servant, and Chief Paulette made the arrest in person, only a few hours before Kavanaugh and Dr. Morgantrude called his attention to the dangerous venture being made by the Insurance Detective.

His courage broken down, Hillyard let fall enough to convince Paulette that Old Pap Purkiss was in the plot; hence that sudden raid, which came just in time to save Prince John from the thirsty blade of Dennis Delougherty.

In some manner, but almost certainly through the too freely wagging tongue of Horace Kavanaugh, Oren Poole learned of that night expedition to inspect the grave of Adolf Mohler, and knowing that if found thus, all scarred by fire, the imposition must surely be discovered, he hastily collected a squad of ruffians with whom he made that timely rush and still more adroit capture of the "corpus delicti."

It was Oren Poole, too, who hired "the gang" to assault the Insurance Special, for he was almost positive that the tireless Prince had found some clue to the truth of that bold imposture, and if permitted to run the full length of his rope, might end in foiling the entire scheme.

The police chief had a regular feast, questioning so many guilty ones in his "sweat-box," and as the result of one bit of admission, the body of poor Adolph Mohler was recovered and again given christian burial, after it was shown to those more deeply interested, where Prince John had clipped off that crippled finger which played so prominent a part in his shrewd detective work.

As a matter of course, Leonard Westlake was never brought to trial, for he was fully cleared from all suspicion of assassinating a man who was yet alive, though now in closer custody than his step-son had been.

And in less than six months more, Leonard Westlake married Ethelyn, and one of their wedding presents was that very steam yacht which the loyal maiden had pointed out to her no less loyal lover, on a certain occasion.

The true story of the "Hillyard Case" created even more of a sensation than had the false tale, and once more "Prince John" was the center of curiosity as he took the stand to bear witness against the bold conspirators.

All parties concerned were found guilty, as charged, and duly sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment.

As for Prince John, he continued on his way, an always honored member of the profession into which far too many disreputable characters have won admission; but all who know him at all intimately, openly declare that the Insurance Special is a prince by nature, even as he is Prince by name!

THE END.

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